

HEALTH RESEARCH SAFETY TIPS

Advice for intrepid internet sleuths looking for credible medical websites, studies and symptom finders

BY HALLIE LEVINE

Cardiologist Barbara Roberts, 78, volunteered with the Rhode Island Medical Reserve Corps during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccinated many hundreds of people. So she was disturbed to learn last April that her cousin's wife, who was also in her 70s, was hospitalized and on a ventilator after contracting COVID.

"I didn't realize she hadn't been vaccinated, but her husband told me that they'd done their research online and decided against it," Roberts recalls. "I was horrified because there's so much health misinformation on the web. People tend to believe anything that supports their own biases—in this case, that it would be dangerous to get the vaccine."

When the woman died, "it made me both very angry and very sad," Roberts says. "It was totally preventable."

Stories like Roberts' are too common these days as more and more of us have turned to the internet to research our own medical conditions and concerns.

According to a 2021 survey, almost 60 percent of all Americans go online to get medical questions answered, and 4 in 5 of us research

our medical recommendations online after a doctor appointment.

Although there are many benefits to doing your own health research, there's a dark side too: "Some people just end up believing everything they read, or they become so cynical about the health information blasted at them online" that they may begin to generally distrust the medical profession, says health care journalist Gary Schwitzer, founder of the former Health News Review website.

The problem could get even worse after the introduction of artificial intelligence-driven text-generating tools called chatbots.

When you ask a chatbot a question, it pulls information from everywhere online to create an amalgam of data, news and opinion, taking from both traditional and unknown sources. Online publishers use these bots to generate content, including in the health space.

We asked some of the nation's top epidemiologists for the fundamentals of doing your own health research, from how to find the most credible sites to evaluating the best symptom checker. We chose three common scenarios you may face at some point to help you find the information you need, safely.

RESEARCH TRIGGER NUMBER 1 Your doctor just gave you an alarming diagnosis.

If you've been told you could have a particular health condition, your first impulse may be to simply type it into a search engine. That's probably not the best move, cautions Alice Pomidor, M.D., a retired professor of geriatrics at Florida State University. "You might get an ad [that looks official] or other information that's not reputable," she explains. (Look for a "Sponsored" tag; it means an organization has paid big dollars to show up at the top of searches related to that topic.)

Rather than type your diagnosis into a search engine, Pomidor recommends that you go to one of the following sites and search for your diagnosed condition within it:

- ▶ **National Institute on Aging ([nia.nih.gov](https://www.nia.nih.gov))**
- ▶ **American Geriatric Society ([healthaging.org](https://www.healthaging.org))**
- ▶ **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov))**
- ▶ **National Institutes of Health ([nih.gov](https://www.nih.gov))**
- ▶ **American Academy of Family Physicians ([familydoctor.org](https://www.familydoctor.org))**
- ▶ **Mayo Clinic ([mayoclinic.org](https://www.mayoclinic.org))**

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Your Health

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Each of these sites includes a health information page where you can search topics from A to Z to find your specific concern.

Any health website sponsored by a federal government agency should provide the most up-to-date, reliable information. Those sites will end in .gov (you can also visit usa.gov for a list of federal websites).

Other excellent options are well-known medical schools, whose sites tend to end in .edu, as well as large professional organizations.

“But it’s important to not just automatically assume that because a website ends in .org, that it’s legitimate,” cautions Robert Shmerling, M.D., a senior faculty editor at Harvard Health Publishing and member of the faculty of medicine. Though .org usually indicates a nonprofit, it may be an advocacy group that’s pushing its own unresearched agenda.

RESEARCH TRIGGER NUMBER 2 You see a startling health news story or hear a surprising medical claim.

If a headline about a health discovery sounds too good to be

true, it usually is. It’s clickbait. The news is based on a new “study,” but there are no links to the study and few or no mentions of an author. “That’s a red flag,” says Jennifer Manganello, a professor of health policy, management and behavior at the School of Public Health at University at Albany.

If there is a link to the study, look for this information:

► Who conducted the study?

Ideally, Manganello says, study authors are affiliated with a large research institution such as the medical school of a highly respected university.

► Can the scientific evidence be trusted?

The gold standard is usually a randomized control trial, where people who received a specific treatment are compared with a control group that didn’t. Scientists also use good but less reliable observational studies. For instance, such a study may find that people who meditate regularly are less likely to have a heart attack. But the results may be due to their healthier lifestyles in general.

► Who was involved with the study, and how many participated?

Well-done studies often

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