Dear Alice,

The Internet has lots of false facts on it. I want to know if I should consider all the health/drug/sex/emotional stuff as fact in science/doctor advice, and what areas are not so qualified in knowing. The reason being is I want to be more informed, and I don't like to be mistaken in passing along knowledge that I don't know to be credible or not.

Answer

Dear Reader,

The Internet is an amazing medium because it enables millions of individuals, organizations, governments, and companies to produce and access information on just about anything. The Internet is also troubling because it enables millions of individuals, organizations, governments, and companies to produce and access information on just about anything. Lots of factual, well-researched info is available online. There's also a load of e-crap. You're very wise to be pick your sites and sources carefully.

So, whose health home page can you trust? It may be impossible to answer this question as the availability and quality of sites can change over time, but here's a smarter-searching checklist that might help you decide what information to take in and pass along:

- **The producer of the web site is clearly identified.** Are the author(s), sponsoring organization or agency, posting company, or any other creator(s) easy to find and clearly displayed? Is there a way to contact them to make comments or get additional information? A response of "no" to these questions might cause one to think twice about using this site at all.
- **The credentials of the creator(s) are listed.** If the information on the site is coming from an organization or company, what is its connection to it? For example, it makes sense for the American Cancer Society to host a page of cancer prevention information. On the other hand, if a tobacco company did the same, you might be wiser to investigate the info from the former. If individuals are responsible for the material presented, what are their backgrounds, qualifications, and for whom do they work? Is there an editorial board or board of trustees? If you can find this data (perhaps through an "About us" page), make
your best judgment about whether or not they're credible providers of the information that you're reading.

- **Sources of information are cited.** When you read something like, "Most Californians eat breakfast," or "sleeping with one sock on has been proven to reduce hair loss," are these declarations attached to sound research? "According to a recent study conducted by the California State Census Board published in the journal, *Eat US.*, 81 percent of California residents eat breakfast," is a good example of complete source citing. Even better is finding a hyperlink included that leads you to the organization that collected and reported on the data shared. This way, you can go right to the source to confirm what's been presented (both of these quotes are made up, by the way). It’s also wise to be wary of any health claims that make you think it’s possible that they’re too good to be true — particularly if they don’t also include citations or references that back up the claim with evidence.

- **Other sources of information are provided.** There are usually multiple sources that can talk about one topic. *Go Ask Alice!*, to name one health info provider, isn't the only source of help for alcohol and other drug concerns. That's why you'll frequently find other institutions, agencies, organizations, and experts listed for additional information on these topics. For further vetting, check out other sites. It’s wise to see how several sources discuss a particular topic — does the information read similarly across sources?

- **Posting dates are listed and updated information is provided.** There's an enormous amount of health information that's generated from all corners of the globe every day. Can you tell when the information you're perusing was published, and whether or not it has been, or will be, updated? An explanation of how those who manage the site’s content go about this task is most likely available.

- **Advertisers or donors aren’t influencing content.** This may be your toughest determination of all. Compare the subjects and suggestions you're reading with the types of products and services that may be advertised within or alongside content, or somewhere else on the site (for example, if products are called out by brand name — is it that the product manufacturer has provided the information?). Pay attention to whether you think advertisers on the site are influencing the content of the articles you're reading.

- **The site’s policy indicates that any personal information you share will remain private.** Check out the site’s privacy policy — this is particularly key if you’re prompted to fill out any personal or identifying information (such as name, date of birth, address, gender, etc.). If the site states that they will share your information with other parties or entities that will provide you with information on useful products, for instance, then you can be assured that any information you share about yourself won’t be kept private.

The Internet's mind-boggling quantity of information, along with how easy it typically is to access it, often leads to it acting as a one-stop shopping center for everything you always wanted to know. It’s key to remember that it's not the only source — there are still real, live health care providers, health promotion professionals, and libraries (places that have actual books, journals, and professionals that can help you find exactly what you're looking for... information).

More health information is better. And as you've pointed out, it also means looking more carefully to determine if what you're being told is really the "best medicine."

Alice!

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