

Dealing with health information

With the wealth of information readily available via the media and internet, it is important for us to become smart consumers of the information we receive.

Not all health information available in magazines, newspapers and on the internet goes through good quality control processes. This can be both confusing and potentially dangerous for consumers.

It can be **confusing** when we receive mixed messages about whether or not we need to make changes to important things such as our diets, medications, or other lifestyle choices.



It is **potentially dangerous** when we do make these changes based on information that is not reliable or factual.

By changing the way we search for and evaluate health information, we can start reducing the confusion and risks and begin to take a more helpful and critical stance.

Information seeking

The words we type into an internet search engine affects the sort of information we find. For example, if we are concerned about the impacts of worrying on our potential for a heart attack, we may type “worry and heart attacks” and hit Search.

This can lead to biased results because of the “filter in” and “filter out” phenomenon. That is, you will most likely

- filter in web pages that *do* talk about there being links between worry and heart attacks, and
- filter out any that *do not* talk about or debunk such links. This unhelpful searching can therefore reinforce your worrisome belief that there is a link!!

There are two steps you can take to change the way you gather and filter information from the internet.

Step 1: Practice using more helpful and less biased search phrases to find out what you want to know. E.g.

| Instead of: | Try: |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| “Worry and heart attacks” | “What causes heart attacks?” or “Leading causes of heart attacks” |
| Less helpful More biased filtering | More helpful Less biased filtering |

Step 2: Look for ways of filtering in alternative view points. You can do this by typing in mismatching statements. E.g.

If you typed: “Is coffee bad for you?”
You could also try: “Is coffee good for you?”

These strategies can lead to you coming up with some very different health information!



Evaluating health information

Even with good search strategies we will often come across unhelpful or even conflicting information.

Unfortunately, in this day and age, anyone with access to the internet can send information around the world and claim it to be factual.

Alternatively, some website or magazine articles can also appear to contain useful information from reputable sources. So how do we know what is good information and what is not so good?

Ten questions to ask...



- Is this written by a qualified and registered health professional (e.g., GP, Psychologist)?
- Does the author represent an established and reputable health organisation (e.g., government body, university, major hospital)?
- Is the author free of commercial interests (i.e., they are not trying to sell you a product or sensationalise a story to sell a magazine)?
- Does the article include multiple pieces of evidence to back up it’s claims (i.e., discusses the results of several research studies conducted by reputable organisations rather than anecdotal stories or one-off studies)?
- Is enough information provided for you to check the background research for yourself?
- Was the background research based on people similar to yourself (e.g., similar age, height/weight, gender, diagnosis, comorbid problems etc)?
- Was the background research based on many people?
- Are statistics clearly explained?
- Is this information consistent with health information you have read from other reputable sources, (e.g., other government bodies, universities, major hospitals)?
- Is a review date provided so that you can tell the information is up-to-date?

The more ticks you have above, the better your health information is likely to be. However, it is important to remember that information from the internet and media is one resource only, and should never alone be used to diagnose a medical or psychological condition, or to make important changes to your medication, diet, or other lifestyle choices.

Before you make any changes...

If after evaluating your health information, you would still like to make changes, follow-up with your GP or local health clinic, who can assist you in understanding the specific risks and benefits of such changes based on your full personal medical and/or psychological history.