How to Spot Health-Related Misinformation Online

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The internet, and especially social media, is exploding with information; not all of it is reliable or true. In fact, there is a growing amount of *mis*information online, especially about science and health topics, including vaccines. Deciding what information to trust, and from whom, can be difficult. But there are some helpful tips you can use to help navigate the swell of information online and separate fact from fiction.

What is misinformation?

Misinformation is incorrect or misleading information. Sometimes it is created and disseminated without the deliberate intent to deceive others, but sometimes it is; this is often referred to as "disinformation."

Why does misinformation stick and spread?

Misinformation spreads online when people who encounter it share or engage with it. It is often presented using attention-grabbing headlines ("clickbait"), which make it more likely to be seen and shared. People often share information quickly on social media, without much deliberation. In fact, 60% of articles shared on social media are shared by users who don't open the article. People also share articles posted or shared by others in their networks, which may lead them to believe the information is accurate. Human nature also biases people to information that confirms their views, which can make provocative headlines even more impactful.

Ask yourself: *Can I trust this source to provide reliable information?*

Green flags suggest you can trust a source. The more green flags, the better. Red flags suggest a source might not be trustworthy. The more red flags, the more skeptical you should be.*

GREEN FLAGS

- Includes scientific, peer-reviewed evidence
- The source is an official institution (credible news organization, academic, government, non-profit organization)
- The web address is .gov, .edu, or .org
- Includes quotes or statements from relevant experts on the topic or in the field
- Other reliable sources confirm or direct to the information
- Appears to be from a neutral source and presents information with neutral language
- Declares any conflicts of interest
- Was published recently

RED FLAGS

- Only includes anecdotes, stories, or case studies, not scientific evidence
- Cites a journal on Beall's List of potential predatory scholarly open-access publishers
- The source is not an institution and may have another motive (to sell a product or service)
- The web address is .com or .net
- Includes quotes from people who are not experts on the topic or in the field
- Other sources don't confirm the information
- It's unclear where the information came from
- Appears biased and presents information in a manipulative, emotional, or alarmist way
- Was not published recently or does not have a publication date

**Adapted from the Australian Academy of Science*

Still unsure if a source is reliable or a piece of information is accurate? Search for the information on a fact-checking website like FactCheck.org, Snopes.com, or Duke University's Reporters' Lab.