



FINDING SURGICAL INFORMATION YOU CAN TRUST

By Warren Kolber

If you find out you need to have surgery, you may feel anxious. If you feel this way, remember it is human nature to fear the unknown. But, here is good news. Learning about your health problem can help reduce your fear. It also can help you make better decisions about your surgery and care.

Judging Accuracy and Credibility

Finding medical information is now easy. Today, thousands of Internet sites provide advice on health. Most newspapers and TV networks report on health news every day. Sorting through this information to get the help you need can be hard. How do you tell the good advice from the “junk”?

Tips to Help You Find Reliable Information

Do not rely on only one source. Seek help from several sources. For example, ask medical professionals. Ask family members. Ask friends. Use the resources at your local library. Look on the Internet.

Be wary of tips that do not list the authors’ credentials.

- Did doctors review it?
- What are the writers’ credentials?
- What are their affiliations?

Check the sources of the information you find.

- What is their reputation?
- What are the credentials of the “experts” interviewed? Are they doctors? Are they scientists?
- What are their reputations?
- Do they work for organizations that are respected?
- What are their affiliations?
- What are the credentials of the editors?
- Look for a list of references. Are the references from respected journals? If so, the advice is more likely to be accurate. Examples of such journals are *The New England Journal of Medicine* and the *Journal of the American College of Surgeons*.

Be careful if there are a lot of testimonials. (Testimonials are stories told by individuals. They are not backed up by scientific findings.) Do not trust ads that claim miraculous cures. Be careful of tips from the media. Most reporters are not health experts. If you use a web site, make sure a board of experts oversees its content.

Not all health information comes from respected sources. Look for journals with high standards of review. Many web sites do not have such standards. The same is true for many consumer publications.

Start With Your Doctor

Your doctors are often the best starting point for health information. You can also ask your doctor’s opinion about information you have found. If you ask your doctor to look at articles or other advice, be sure to include

- the author’s name,
- the name of the publication, and
- when the material was published.

Do not give your doctor too much material to look over. It may take away from the time he or she has to spend on your medical care.

Go to Your Local Library

A trip to a library can be a key starting point. If you have a medical library near you, this is often the best choice. Start at the reference desk. Your librarian can help you find the information you are looking for. The materials you will find in libraries include

- medical texts
- reference books,
- consumer books,
- newspaper articles,
- journal articles, and
- Internet health sites.

Surf the Web

The Internet is one of the easiest places to find health information. The problem is finding advice you can trust. Here are some tips to help you find reliable help on the Internet.

Start at a known site such as those mentioned below. Broad search engines will return too much information. Do not look at just one site. Check several reliable sites.

Make sure you can verify the source of the information you find.

- Are the names of the authors included?
- Are their affiliations listed?
- Is contact information listed?
- Do the authors have financial interests in a product being sold on the site?
- Do they have financial interests in the site?

Watch out for sites that only have one source of information. Be wary of sites that are not respectful of other sources of advice. Use only sites that are reviewed by a board of experts. This will ensure that the advice is credible.

Knowledge about health is always changing. Make sure that the information you find includes the date of publication. It should also include any dates of revision. All sponsorship should be stated.

Do not use anyone who offers to diagnose you online. Do not use anyone who offers to treat you online. Beware of chat groups. Many of them are full of misinformation. Do not be fooled by a list of links. Any web site can link to another. Read the site's privacy rules. Make sure that any information you give them will be secure.

Many insurers provide information about their plans on the Internet. This can be a good resource for learning about your coverage. Contact your carrier for your plan's web site address.

Here are some web site addresses that offer health information.

DiscoveryHealth	http://www.discoveryhealth.com
Health A to Z	http://www.healthatoz.com
Healthfinder	http://www.healthfinder.gov
Intelihealth	http://www.intelihealth.com
Mayohealth	http://www.mayohealth.org
Medscape	http://www.medscape.com
Merck Manual Home Edition	http://www.merckhomeedition.com
WebMD	http://www.webmd.com

Be careful. Many of these sites are funded by companies that are promoting their products. This fact may not be obvious.

Professional Surgery-related Associations

Health associations are some of the best resources. The list of sites below includes those sponsored by the top groups.

American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons	http://www.aaos.org
American Association of Critical Care Nurses	http://www.aacn.org
American Association of Neurological Surgeons	http://www.neurosurgery.org
American Association of Nurse Anesthetists	http://www.aana.com
American Cancer Society	http://www.cancer.org
American College of Surgeons	http://www.facs.org
American Society of Anesthesiologists	http://asahq.org
American Society for Bariatric Surgery	http://www.asbs.org
American Society of Colon and Rectal Surgeons	http://www.fascrs.org
American Society of PeriAnesthesia Nurses	http://www.aspan.org
American Society of Plastic Surgeons	http://www.plasticsurgery.org
American Society of Transplant Surgeons	http://www.astst.org
AORN, Association of periOperative Registered Nurses	http://www.aorn.org
National Association of Theatre Nurses	http://www.natn.org
Society of American Gastrointestinal Endoscopic Surgeons	http://www.sages.org
Society of Laparoendoscopic Surgeons	http://www.sls.org
Society of Surgical Oncology, Inc	http://www.surgonc.org
Society of Thoracic Surgeons	http://www.ctsnet.org

Voluntary Organizations

Voluntary groups, such as the American Cancer Society and Arthritis Foundation, often provide sound advice. The National Health Information Center (NHIC) can help you get in touch with such organizations (800-336-4797).

US Government Resources

The US Department of Health and Human Services provides a key search site at <http://www.healthfinder.gov>. It is a gateway to the resources produced by the government.

The federal government provides three other resources for locating health information. The National Health Information Center operates clearinghouses on health issues. They provide

- publications,
- referrals, and
- answers to questions.

Get a free list of clearinghouses at <http://NHIC-nt.health.org>. Call (800) 336-4797. Or, write PO Box 1133, Washington, DC 20013-1133.

The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality offers tips on a wide range of health topics at <http://www.ahrq.gov>. The National Library of Medicine offers a catalog of articles called MEDLINEplus at <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus>.

Resource

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, *Now You Have a Diagnosis: What's Next? Using Healthcare Information to Help Make Treatment Decisions*, pub no 00-0004 (Rockville, MD: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, February 2000).