



KNOW THE SOURCE OF ONLINE HEALTH INFORMATION

by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott

WHEN IT COMES TO SOMETHING as important as health and wellness, Texans seeking more information should always consult their doctor or licensed health care professional. According to a recent Pew Internet and American Life Project study, every day an estimated eight million Americans search the Internet for health care information. But Texans should never solely rely on a Web site to diagnose or treat a serious illness. Equally important, Internet users should always pay close attention to their information source.

Although many Web sites offer informative, helpful information about a variety of health and lifestyle issues, not every site can be trusted for accurate, factual material. Texans who consult the Internet for health care information should always pay close attention to the entity operating the site.

In some cases, what appears to be medically-oriented Web site may actually be an advertising tool for a third party with a financial incentive to exaggerate or downplay a product's benefits or dangers. For example, Web-based law firm advertising is particularly common among Web sites that are dedicated to certain specific

illnesses or prescription medications. The Center for Medicine in the Public Interest recently noted that Internet searches for medical information produced results that were "dominated by Web sites paid for and sponsored by either class action law firms or legal marketing sites searching for plaintiff referrals."

Similarly, Web sites that promote alternative therapies and treatments also may have financial interests that seek to influence a patient's decision.

Texans also should be leery of information they discover in online forums, where patients, physicians and others discuss prescription medications and treatments. It is nearly impossible to verify the credibility of individuals who participate in interactive patient forums. A participant who claims to be a medical professional may actually be an attorney trying to solicit business or a vendor trying to sell products. Anecdotal stories about prescription drugs or treatments, whether positive or negative, may not be based on sound science.

To distinguish unbiased online information sources, Texans should look for broader content and objective

data sources. For example, Web sites created by reputable organizations like the American Cancer Society and the American Heart Association often feature peer-reviewed medical journals and other impartial research sources. In addition, many government agencies, including the Food and Drug Administration, impose similarly rigorous standards upon any research included on their Web sites.

But even trusted, verifiable online information cannot be relied upon to treat serious ailments or answer critical medical questions. Texans should always contact a licensed medical professional whenever their health is at risk. An in-person visit to a doctor's office or local clinic is the best way to ensure patients are getting accurate information that is tailored to their unique health needs.

Texans who have encountered misleading or deceptive medically-oriented Web sites may file a complaint with the Office of the Attorney General by calling (800) 252-8011 or visiting our Web site at www.texasattorneygeneral.gov.

POINTS TO REMEMBER



ONLINE HEALTH SOURCES

Texans who research illnesses and prescription medications online should carefully consider the financial self-interests of online sources.

Trusted sources may include:

U. S. Food and Drug Administration
www.fda.gov

American Heart Association
www.americanheart.org

American Cancer Society
www.cancer.org

To report a deceptive medically-oriented Web site, contact the Office of the Attorney General at (800) 252-8011 or file a complaint online at www.texasattorneygeneral.gov.



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