



How to evaluate online nutrition info

I can easily find information about nutrition online, but I'm not certain how to tell if it's reliable. Are there good sources I can trust?

There are plenty of sources of trustworthy nutrition information online — too many to try to list here. But perhaps even more important is learning for yourself how to evaluate information you find on the Web.

Several good sources provide guidance on that. Here are some tips from the National Institutes of Health in its “MedlinePlus Guide to Healthy Web Surfing” (<http://bit.ly/hlthyweb>) and from the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (formerly the American Dietetic Association) in its Complete Food and Nutrition Guide (Fourth Edition, 2012):

- First, find details about the source of information. Look for an “about us” page — is the source a branch of the government or a highly regarded health-related organization? Is it a nonprofit or educational institution? Is it a commercial enterprise or an individual's blog? It's possible to get good information and ideas on all sorts of sites, but you will want to use extra caution if someone is trying to sell you something or doesn't have highly regarded credentials. People can be passionate about their food and their diet, but that doesn't mean they necessarily have the background and expertise you're looking for.

- Be on the lookout for claims that sound too good to be true. As with any pitch, a healthy dose of skepticism is called for if a product — even if the “product” in this case is a supplement or a nutrient — promises to be a cure-all or carries some kind of secret ingredient.

- Weigh the evidence presented. Personal stories and other types of anecdotal information can be compelling, but look for research that has broader implications than “this is what worked for me.” In addition, if research is cited, understand that one study is just a small piece of the puzzle that builds scientific consensus. Look for indications that this study backs up previous findings or, if not, that it offers an explanation about why researchers found something new.

- Look for evidence of bias. Often, industry funding is necessary to conduct research or develop a website, so that in itself doesn't mean the information is flawed. But it is a clue that should prompt you to investigate other sources on the same topic to see if there's another perspective.

- Be cautious if a site requests personal information. Look for its privacy policy on how it will use that information before sharing.

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