

Making Decisions about Your Health

Throughout our lives we can be faced with various health issues. We may need to seek information to better understand a health condition or to help us make decisions about our health. This may relate to:

- understanding what treatment options are available
- understanding how to manage symptoms
- understanding how we can prevent and/or minimise the risk for conditions such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes and osteoporosis

This fact sheet may assist you in this process.

What to ask yourself

To assist you in making decisions about your health, ask yourself the following questions:

- what could happen if I did nothing at all?
- what treatment choices are available to me?
- what are the possible risks and benefits of the different choices?
- how do the benefits and risks weigh up for me?
- how would this decision affect my family or partner?
- have I gathered enough information to make my decision?

What can you do?

There are many things you can do to better understand a health issue or help you make decisions about your health, including:

- talk with a trusted health practitioner
- gather reliable and up to date information about a health issue you are faced with
- think about all the options and weigh up the positives and negatives of each
- talk to other people you trust about their experiences
- think about what has worked for you in the past
- trust your own knowledge and personal experience

Choosing a health practitioner

When choosing a health practitioner some things to consider are:

- their expertise
- how accessible they are (e.g. location, appointment times, cost)
- their ability to listen, understand and communicate skilfully
- their willingness to involve you in decision-making about your healthcare
- their qualifications and/or accreditation

Developing a good partnership with your health practitioner relies on things such as mutual respect, clear communication and shared responsibility. While it may take time and effort to establish this partnership, it will be a worthwhile process if it helps you to feel comfortable and supported in managing your health.

What is evidence based practice and why does evidence matter?

Evidence based practice is a term used to describe the management or treatment of a health condition that has been proven by research to work or be effective. This forms the basis of most healthcare today. When making an informed decision about your health, while it is important to consider the choices available to you that are based on evidence from research, you will also need to consider what you can afford and have access to, as well as your own personal values (i.e. does a particular treatment fit with your lifestyle and how you choose to take care of yourself?).

Information and advice about your health can come from family, friends, the media and with today's technology, the internet. However, these sources do not necessarily provide information that is correct and based on evidence.

It is difficult for an untrained individual to understand, sift through and interpret the latest research and evidence on particular health issues and treatment options. For this reason, we need to rely on trusted sources to obtain our health information, such as health practitioners who know our medical history and have training and qualifications in managing health conditions and prescribing treatments.

Health information from the internet

Every year more and more Australians are using the internet to seek health information. Reasons for this might be:

- to collect more information about a diagnosed condition
- to search for alternative treatments
- to seek support from others who have the same condition
- to look for patient support programs
- to resolve conflicting health information

A range of information is readily available and easy to access via the internet but this can present problems such as how to judge what is factually correct, and importantly what is right for you. It is also possible to find misleading or contradictory information, it may be difficult to find the right information or you may be bombarded with too much information.

It is important when searching the internet for health information that you are able to recognise reputable websites that provide factual and researched information and do **not** have a commercial or financial interest in the information they are providing

It is important not to use the internet to self-diagnose or self-treat a health problem. Always see a health practitioner for professional diagnosis, treatment and management options for health conditions.

How to know if a medical website is reputable

Medical misinformation or 'cyberquackery' is widespread on the internet. When judging whether a medical website is reputable or not, consider the following:

- **Who is responsible for the website?** Web content and information can be significantly influenced by its creators. Be wary of health information websites that are created by sponsors or those that have a commercial interest in the information provided. Government health websites, such as the *Better Health Channel* and *HealthInsite* are reputable sources of health information on the internet.
- **Why has the website been produced?** Knowing why the site has been produced can help provide you with an idea of any bias the site may have. Be wary of sites that claim to give you an online diagnosis or treatments that you pay for online through the site.
- **Is the website easy to understand and well-written?** Who is the intended audience of the information on the site? If you cannot understand the website content or the information is too confusing, it will not be helpful to you. Errors or mistakes in content may reflect the inaccuracy of the website.
- **Is the information up to date?** Online health information should provide the date it was last updated. For a website to be reputable, its content must be updated regularly and also provide details on how the site is reviewed.
- **Is the information accurate and reliable?** Consider the following: the author of the information, whether the site has an editorial policy, presence of contact details on the page, information source, whether there is justification for any advertising, and if the site has HONcode certification (the HONcode is a code of ethics used by a website manager to provide the public with quality, objective, and transparent medical information).
- **Does the website respect my privacy?** If a website is collecting your personal information, it is important to know what the creators want it for; some websites may sell or pass on your personal information and others may use the information to better design their site to suit their consumer's needs.

When seeking information about a health condition such as treatment or medication options, it is important to consult with a health practitioner **face-to-face**. It is also a good idea to discuss health information that you find on the internet or through other sources with your health practitioner.

Where can I get more information?

www.jeanhales.org.au

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au – Better Health Channel

www.healthinsite.gov.au – Health*Insite*

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This fact sheet is designed to be informative and educational. It is not intended to provide specific medical advice or replace advice from your health practitioner.

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