Sleep, Eat & Exercise

Sources of Health Information

After going through this lesson, you will be able to:
- identify characteristics of credible and reliable health information; and
- distinguish between primary, secondary and tertiary sources of health information.

Where do you get your health information?

Video Transcript
Darius: Health information? Maybe from my parents; they taught me to eat healthy food and they taught me to do sports.
Lauren: I get a lot of my general nutrition information from my roommates.
Larry: My friends and I talk about it a lot and then when my friends and I are talking about it, we’re usually talking about online articles or articles we read in the newspaper or just a lot of things we come across.
Andrew: Often times, I start off with like a Google search and try to find some credible information, some background information on whatever I’m trying to look for. And afterwards, I might go to like someone on campus that I trust to kind of verify that information and make sure I’m going on the right path.
Soyei: From doctor appointments, and I’ve taken some nutrition class or health classes that helped me learn about my health as well.
Rena: Before college, a lot of my health info came from my mom, and her health info came from her mom, and so on and so forth. So when I came to college, I realized that some of the health info that I had might’ve been—let’s say—from the 1960s. So after I came to college, I decided to go to my school’s health services to see what are the health facts today.
Christy: Just check multiple sources from credible places—like associations, organizations—same as writing a research paper, but for your own health.

You’re undoubtedly bombarded with health information from a wide variety of sources: the radio, Internet, television, magazines, and friends, among others.

But how do you know whether or not what you see and hear is true? How do you separate fact from fiction?

Unfortunately, many people’s beliefs about what’s healthy and what’s not are based more on popular fads than on science.
Sources of Health Information

These lessons will provide you with accurate information about a variety of health-related topics. However, it’s important for you to develop some critical reading and thinking skills so you can evaluate other sources of health information you will come across throughout life.

**Resources:**
- Tutorial- Evaluating Web Pages: Techniques to Apply & Questions to Ask

Sources of information in the health sciences are separated into three main categories: primary, secondary, and tertiary. A source’s category is determined by its level of originality and detail.

**Primary sources are original sources of information on new research or developments and are considered to be the most credible, or trustworthy, sources of information.**

They include journal articles of original research, conference papers, dissertations, technical reports, patents and tabulated sets of data, such as health statistics. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) regularly posts data and statistics on a wide variety of health-related topics, such as physical activity and alcohol use.

Articles in professional journals report on original, first-hand research. The authors as well as their affiliations and sources of funding are provided. This increases the articles’ credibility. Further, most professional journal articles are refereed before publication. This means that they are peer-reviewed by experts from relevant fields to ensure their quality and accuracy. Articles without scientific merit are usually rejected by the journal and not printed. Journal articles that are primary sources typically consist of the following parts:

- Abstract
- Introduction or Background
- Methods
- Results
- Discussion
- Conclusions
- References, also known as footnotes

They are often long and can be hard to understand. However, they are one of the most accurate sources of information. Throughout your college career and beyond, you will likely be required to access, read, and understand primary sources related to your professional field.
Note: If you have to write a research paper, look for a good primary source relevant to your topic. Then, the references from that paper will likely make you aware of other sources that may be helpful to you.

**Resources:**
- Tips for understanding the various sections of a scientific journal article
- CDC Data & Statistics

**Secondary sources of information are those that summarize or reorganize information reported by researchers in the primary literature.** They typically provide an analysis, evaluation, or interpretation of the existing research or data. Review articles—those that summarize the literature on a specific topic—and textbooks are good examples of secondary sources of information.

Compared to primary sources, secondary sources are generally shorter and easier to understand, and you will likely come across many of them throughout your academic career. They are generally accurate, especially if found in a reputable review journal or required by one of your instructors. However, because secondary sources are not a direct source of information, a risk is that the authors may have misinterpreted the original source.

**Tertiary sources of information are probably the most commonly encountered source of information for most people; however, as a group, they are the least reliable.**

This is because they are the furthest from the direct, original source of information, having been distilled and condensed into a brief, easy-to-read format for the general public. Fact sheets, encyclopedias, magazines, and news sources are examples of tertiary sources of information.

Sometimes tertiary sources refer to research, but the authors of the research and a reference to where the research is published aren’t always listed. Instead, an article might broadly claim, “researchers found...” Usually, only general conclusions of the research are discussed—not the specific methods of data collection and analysis.
Out of all three types of sources, tertiary sources allow for the most potential for error or misinterpretation. That’s not to say that you can’t believe anything you may read in a magazine; it just means that it’s important to critically evaluate the content.

Consider blogs, YouTube, and Wikipedia. While such sites are generally interesting and may offer truthful information, their credibility and accuracy can be questionable. It’s probably not a good idea to use these types of sources as references in your next paper, unless, of course, they’re particularly relevant to your topic and you clear it with your instructor first.

The Internet has become an extremely popular source of information.

It’s possible to find primary, secondary, and tertiary sources in a matter of seconds. Just consider the variety of articles, infographics, and testimonials shared via social media everyday.

The key to navigating your way through all of this information efficiently and effectively is to develop some savvy search skills and critical reading skills.

For starters, the domain of a website’s URL generally indicates where the information is coming from, which can give you a sense of its credibility. For example, only certain entities can use the following domains:

- .edu: educational institution
- .gov: United States governmental entity or agency
- .mil: U.S. military
- .museum: museum

.org was originally intended for use by non-profit organizations but can now be used by other types of organizations as well. Likewise, .com was originally intended for use by for-profit businesses, but it has become the most widely used URL by all types of businesses and organizations, including non-profit organizations, schools, and private individuals.

Resources:
Ten tips for searching the Internet:
http://whitepapers.virtualprivatelibrary.net/SearchTips.pdf
As you read through any given source—one found via the Internet or otherwise—ask yourself these important questions to evaluate its credibility:

- Who wrote this? Is the author a qualified authority on the topic, such as an accredited University, a government research institution, or a public healthcare organization?
- What is the style of presentation? Is the author making broad generalizations or reporting testimonials? If research is being cited, are references included?
- What is the purpose and reputation of the publication? For example, is it to inform an educated audience or the general public, advance scientific knowledge, or sell a product or idea?
- Does it sound too good to be true? If so, it probably is. Check to see if the claims are backed by research, and if so, whether the research cited was conducted by an objective third party or by a company trying to sell a product. If the site or publication is trying to sell you something, be wary.
- Is the information timely? If not, it may no longer be accurate, and it would be a good idea to look for something more recent.

What are some credible sources of health information?

**Video Transcript**

Sarah Sevcik: When searching online for health information, it’s important to confirm the credibility of a source. So if you’re doing a simple search for healthy eating, for example, you’re going to see thousands of displays on a search engine, and some of them may be credible and some of them may not be credible. Some good, reliable, credible sources of health information include international, national, and state health agencies. So think of things like the World Health Organization, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and state health departments. Some national associations such as the American Medical Association, the American Public Health Association—those are other great places to find credible health information.

When visiting other websites, you want to pay attention to who is publishing the information. So pay attention to what organization is providing that information and whether or not that organization is trying to sell a particular idea or particular product to you. So the health industry, like any other industry, is a for-profit industry, and ideas and products are definitely trying to be sold to us. So we’ll really want to be savvy consumers and think through
What are some credible sources of health information? Video Transcript Cont’d…
Sarah Sevcik: … what an organization or website is trying to promote. If you see information that sounds too good to be true—think about the comments around "quick ways to lose weight" or "magic diet pills"—those are certain statements that probably aren’t credible sources of information. Likewise, if you see statements that are demonizing foods or whole food groups such as "five foods to never eat," you probably want to stay clear of those kinds of websites, as well. So even in areas not related to health and wellbeing, it’s always important to check the source of the information and confirm its credibility.

These lessons summarize the current scientific literature on relevant topics and provide helpful resources in addition to tips from students and experts in relevant fields.

Please keep in mind that these lessons provide general health guidelines. For specific advice or treatment regarding your own personal health, please consult with a physician, registered dietitian, certified personal trainer, psychologist, or other trusted healthcare provider.

A final note regarding these lessons: Our culture, for the most part, uses a gender-binary and sex-binary framework—thinking and functioning in terms of men and women when discussing gender, or male and female when discussing biological sex. However, we recognize that this doesn’t encompass everyone’s experience or identity and have therefore used inclusive language throughout these lessons. Such language consists of words and phrases that demonstrate respect for how a variety of individuals self-identify their gender and sexual orientation, describe their bodies and relationships, and express their sexuality. In addition to the gendered pronouns him, her, she, he, his, and hers, you may notice non-binary pronouns such as ze (pronounced zee), hir (pronounced here), and hirs (pronounced heres), as well as they/them/their in reference to a singular person. Those who do not identify as man or woman may sometimes adopt these or other gender-neutral pronouns.

The results of some research cited in these lessons refer to binary labels—for example, men and women or male and female. When we report research results, we use the same terms used by the researchers, recognizing that some of the research may not be inclusive. We realize researchers may have misidentified some participants’ gender or biological sex, excluded those who didn’t identify with the terms used, or neglected to realize how using binary
labels in their data collection and reporting can exclude people. Despite its potentially exclusionary nature, we have chosen to include such research within the lessons because we believe that the data still has value in informing and supporting our discussions and may be the only or best data available on a given topic.

If you would like more information about gender- and sexual-identity, gender-neutral and inclusive language, or the role gender plays in our culture, please visit the resources below.

**Resources:**
Understanding Gender  
Rothenberger Institute course: Sexuality Matters:

**Community Resources:**
UMTC GLBTA Programs Office:

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