

Is Google a Good Place to Get Medical Advice?

Who is your preferred source for health advice? Gwyneth Paltrow? Pete Evans? Or qualified medical practitioners – like Dr Oz?

I hate to break it to you, but if you're getting advice from any of these people, you're quite likely being misled.

For example, contrary to Gwyneth Paltrow's website, [experts advise](#) inserting jade "eggs" into your vagina is a very bad idea.

And last time I checked, Facebook wasn't a peer-reviewed medical website, but that doesn't seem to matter to [20% of people](#) using it for health advice.

The sheer volume of online health information now at our fingertips is both a blessing and a curse. How do you determine what is right and what is outright dangerous?

Should you get a "[V-steam](#)" to keep your lady parts looking young and healthy? Should you whip up a batch of paleo [bone broth](#) for your bub? (the answer to both these questions is no).

It used to be that a medical degree was a pretty good measure of reliability, until the likes of TV doctor [Mehmet Oz](#) and [Dr Andrew Wakefield](#), the scientist responsible for publishing fraudulent research linking vaccines to autism, came along.

Even published peer-reviewed literature is no longer guaranteed to be untarnished – the rise of [predatory publishing](#) has muddied the waters to the point where an advanced degree in science or medicine is needed to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Never mind that most peer-reviewed information is locked away behind pay-walls, meaning the average person has to fork out anything upwards of US\$35 just for the privilege of reading it.

Where are we getting health advice?

The proliferation of misleading health advice online is worrying because a [recent survey](#) reported almost four out of five Australians (78%) now use the internet to source health information.

Slightly more frightening is that three out of five people (58%) [admitted](#) they Google health information to avoid seeing a health professional.

Which should come as no surprise to anyone – just about all of us now walk around with the internet in our pockets. Googling health information is cheaper, faster, more convenient and importantly (for some), discreet. And a quick search from the work bathroom avoids the embarrassment of providing intimate details to a stranger.

Google knows this.

Which is where Dr Google's [symptom checker](#) and [health condition cards](#) come in.

New and improved Dr Google

The symptom checker is available on the Google app and works by you typing or talking in a string of symptoms. For example, I typed “hacking cough, headache” and Google returned “flu, common cold, upper respiratory infection” under a tab called “health conditions related to this search”. You can then click on those headings to be taken to a health card.

The health cards, launched in Australia last month, cover

around 900 conditions, such as asthma, measles and flu, and provide basic information about the condition under three tabs – “about”, “symptoms” and “treatment”. They have been welcomed by doctors in the US and [Australia](#) alike, with the former [reportedly](#) downloading them to present to patients.

The interface has a share button, the option to download the information to a PDF (to print out and take to your doctor), and a “related conditions” tab. You can access the symptom checker from the Google app and the health cards from both the app and browser.

These innovations are in response to the proliferation of pseudo-scientific and downright shonky advice that exists on Google. And while the tools are constantly being improved, they’re not perfect.

For example, given symptoms can be vague, and are often shared across several conditions, Google suggested I either had “cold, flu, meningitis or Yellow Fever” when I typed in “backache, fever, headache”. So clearly, some level of discretion is advised.

The search engine giant is mindful of the potential for these tools to falsely reassure people about their health or, on the contrary, alarm them unnecessarily. They emphasise the advice returned is not a substitute for a face-to-face consultation with your general practitioner.

What’s important here is the reliability of the information returned by Google, and it seems to have that covered. Symptom checker is informed mostly by [Knowledge Graph](#), the Google-made database tool that aggregates information from a swathe of sources and transforms it into an easily understood format.

But Google has gone one step further – it has collaborated with Harvard Medical School and the Mayo Clinic in the USA to check the accuracy of returned results. In addition, the curation effort will soon extend further to ask people who use

symptom check how its results can be improved.

All of which combines to return significantly better results than those retrieved by a standard, non-curated, Google search.

Whether we like it or not, people are going to continue to search for health information and advice online. This move by Google to provide accurate, reliable health advice on page one of search results should be applauded.

At the least, consumers can now find curated information from the Mayo Clinic rather than Dr Oz or Pete Evans.

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[Rachael Dunlop](#), Honorary Research Fellow, [Macquarie University](#). This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).