



818 18th Street, NW • Suite 1000 • Washington, DC 20006  
202.728.7199 • fax: 202.728.7238 • [www.womenheart.org](http://www.womenheart.org)

## Casting a Web

### *How to get good medical information from the internet*

You've just gotten home from visiting your doctor, with a new medical diagnosis, another prescription, or maybe some unanswered questions that occurred to you in the last five minutes. There was a time when you might have called your doctor for information and answers; nowadays you are probably more likely to hop onto a computer on a fact-finding mission. But how can you be sure that the information you find is credible, reliable, and safe?

Because the worldwide web is overflowing with literally billions of medical factoids, it can be difficult to tell the good from the bad — and misinformation can definitely be harmful to your health. Here's some advice about how to navigate the internet and get the information that will help you manage your heart disease safely.

- **What's in a name?** It's important to understand URL (website) addresses:
  - ".org" = a nonprofit organization (i.e. [www.womenheart.org](http://www.womenheart.org))
  - ".edu" = an educational institution (i.e. [www.yale.edu](http://www.yale.edu))
  - ".gov" = a government agency (i.e. [www.nhlbi.gov](http://www.nhlbi.gov))
  - ".com" = a commercial business (i.e. [www.cheerioshelpinghearts.com](http://www.cheerioshelpinghearts.com))

Medical information that you receive from different websites can vary widely based on their focus. There are many different heart disease organizations which focus on various aspects of the disease: for instance, the Adult Congenital Heart Association provides specific information for all adults, both male and female, with congenital heart disease, while WomenHeart provides information on all types of heart disease, but specifically related to women. Be sure to click on that all-important "About Us" link on an organization's home page so that you understand the focus of that group.

- **Consider the source.** With blogging on the rise, it has become more important than ever to know the source of the information you are reading. A reputable blogger will include links to articles, videos, and scholarly research, and you should be sure to click on those links to verify the information for yourself. When reading medical studies, look to see who sponsored the study — many drug companies sponsor medical research, and while that doesn't mean that the study will favor the sponsor, it can still be useful to look for additional research sponsored by other groups, so that you can get a balanced view.

- **Remember your gender.** Heart disease research focused primarily on men for decades, meaning that some medical findings may not apply to women. When reading studies, look for information on the study participants — sometimes buried deep within the research — to identify gender, age, ethnicity, and other factors so that you can

better understand how the study does, or does not, relate to you.

- **Wiki know-how.** Teachers and librarians often decry the use of the free online encyclopedia, Wikipedia, because it allows just about anyone to post information. However, it can be a useful research tool since it provides a lot of information in one place — if you know how to use it properly. Sometimes you'll see an entry flagged with a notice that it does not cite any reliable sources or references. A flagged entry means that you need to keep looking elsewhere. However, an entry that is unflagged could actually be useful; it will be chock full of verifiable cited references to medical journals, universities, and institutions, which will link you to further information — kind of like one-stop shopping!
- **Jump to the next page.** Google “women’s heart disease” and you’ll get over 68 million results. However, research shows that most people tend to click only on the first ten items that pop up in a search engine, rather than clicking on the “next page” arrow and beyond. Just because something pops up in the top ten doesn’t always mean it has the best information, so you should click through for a few pages to see if any other results catch your eye.
- **Refine your search.** Maybe you were hoping not to slog through 68 million results for “women’s heart disease” — so be more specific. Try searching for “women’s heart disease blueberries” and the results suddenly drop down to 276,000. Add the word “smoothies” and you get 28,000 results.
- **Don’t self-diagnose.** The beauty of the internet is that you have so much information instantly at your fingertips, but the drawback is that it can be easily misinterpreted — leading people to think that a case of the sniffles is a rare allergic reaction. Use the internet as a way to educate yourself on the topics that you want to discuss with your doctor in greater detail — so you can become truly heart-healthy.

**We do a lot of research at WomenHeart, bringing you the most recent pertinent information about women’s heart health. Here are our top ten starting points:**

**American Heart Association**

<http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=1200000>

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**

<http://www.cdc.gov/>

**Circulation: Journal of the American Heart Association**

<http://circ.ahajournals.org/>

**Epocrates**

<https://online.epocrates.com/noFrame/>

**Institute for Safe Medication Practices**

<http://www.ismp.org/default.asp>

**Internet Public Library**

<http://www.ipl.org/div/subject/browse/hea68.00.00/>

**Mayo Clinic**

<http://www.mayoclinic.com>

**Medline Plus**

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/heartdiseaseinwomen.html>

**National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute**

<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/>

**Science Daily**

[http://www.sciencedaily.com/news/health\\_medicine/heart\\_disease/](http://www.sciencedaily.com/news/health_medicine/heart_disease/)