Where do I find out about my treatment options?

Treatment options are not just about choosing between different medications. They might include observation without treatment or “watchful waiting,” lifestyle modifications (smoking cessation, exercise, dietary changes or reduced alcohol consumption), physical therapy, or surgical procedures. Decisions about preferred alternatives depend on a number of interrelated factors such as disease severity, other accompanying conditions, how symptoms are perceived, degree of functional disability, and worries about prognosis. Due to the complexities related to decisions about treatment options, talking to your physician is most often your best approach. Many patients want to learn more about treatment options, especially if their illness is serious or if they have unsuccessfully tried one or more treatments. You and your physician should discuss your situation, consider the options, and agree on a treatment plan.

Are textbooks on diseases and their treatments good sources of information?
Medical textbooks available in libraries often represent excellent sources of information for those who want to learn more about specific diseases, their symptoms and diagnoses. Such information is generally accurate, even if the textbook is several years old. However, information on various treatment options, the course of a disease and its prognosis do change as medicine advances. New effective medications may rapidly alter treatment approaches, so a textbook may be out of date, even if it had been published recently. Time-sensitive new information also may change what is in the drug package insert.

Many books are written specifically for consumers about diseases and their treatments. Some are published by recognized consumer organizations such as Consumers Union and Public Citizen. Another is written by the hosts of the popular radio show People’s Pharmacy, Joe and Terry Graedon. At the other end of the spectrum, there are books which offer little more than promotions by advocates for specific diseases and the sellers of sometimes questionable treatments.

What are the advantages of the Internet?
The Internet is one of the best sources for information because updates can be
made instantly. As noted in the next chapter, the limitation of the Internet is that its accuracy depends on the source of the information. Commercial interests, for example, often use the Internet to promote their own products. The key challenge for consumers is separating useful information from that which is largely promotional and potentially harmful.

The U.S. government operates a number of free Internet sites with disease and medication information written specifically for consumers. There are at least two advantages to these government sites compared to those created by the private sector. First, when errors or misinformation are detected on a government site, the public can intervene and the information can be corrected if the science supports a correction. Second, the process used to create government sites is open and transparent to the public.

Below are some Web sites that, in our opinion, provide reliable independent information for consumers. Also, these Web sites have been available for a long time and are kept up to date.

*Professional product labels or package inserts.* The DailyMed Web site is a collaboration between the National Library of Medicine and the FDA to make available free of charge to the public the package inserts for all prescription medications marketed in the U.S. ([www.dailymed.nlm.nih.gov/dailymed/about.cfm](http://www.dailymed.nlm.nih.gov/dailymed/about.cfm)). Package inserts contain the medication’s FDA-approved uses, information on when a medication must not be used (contraindications),
warnings, drug interactions, and FDA-approved doses. DailyMed offers a function that links unfamiliar technical terms to a medical dictionary. Since this information is written for health professionals, you may require help from your physician or pharmacist to fully understand this technical jargon. The package insert is the best place to start before you take any newly prescribed medication.

The FDA’s Drugs@FDA Web page is another source for FDA-approved package inserts (www.accessdata.fda.gov/scripts/cder/drugsatfda/). In addition to package inserts, this Web page is useful for finding generic products for brand-name drugs, consumer information for medications approved since 1998, and all drugs with a specific active ingredient.

Information about Medication Safety. The FDA’s Web site (www.fda.gov) is a good resource when looking for safety information. The Consumer Health Information page (www.fda.gov/consumer/default.htm) has a link to find the latest drug product and safety information (www.fda.gov/consumer/updates/druginfo041108.html). The following is a small sample of topics that can be found on this page:

- Index to Drug Specific Safety Information is an alphabetical listing of drugs that have been the subject of FDA Public Health Advisories, early communications about an emerging safety issue, and other important information (www.fda.gov/cder/drug/drugsafety/DrugIndex.htm).
- Public Health Advisories contain important drug safety information and recommendations for actions to avoid or minimize possible harm from a medication (www.fda.gov/cder/news/pubpress.htm).
- The FDA’s Drug Safety Initiative Web page provides links to more safety information on the FDA’s Web site (www.fda.gov/cder/drugSafety.htm).

Special mention must be made of Dr. Sid Wolfe and the Public Citizen Health Research Group that has advocated for public access to accurate drug information for consumers for more than 40 years. The Health Research Group has since 1995 published Worst Pills, Best Pills News (www.worstpills.org), a monthly newsletter that is devoted to writing about drug safety problems for consumers. The Worst Pills, Best Pills publications were the first to give consumers clear, concise recommendations on drugs that should not be used based on the availability of safer or more effective alternatives. The Public Citizen publications remain among the best sources of drug safety information.
**General Medical Information.** The MedlinePlus Web site is produced by the National Library of Medicine, a part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and was created specifically for consumers ([www.medlineplus.gov/](http://www.medlineplus.gov/)). It contains a medical encyclopedia, a medical dictionary, and a variety of other health topics. There also are links to the Web pages of NIH institutes such as the National Cancer Institute; National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute; and the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine. The MedlinePlus Web site is large and will require some practice before it can be navigated efficiently.

**Where do I learn about new treatments under development?**

If you and your physician have tried most standard treatment options for a particular condition without satisfactory results, it may make sense to find out what new treatments are under development. A good source is the Web site [www.clinicaltrials.gov](http://www.clinicaltrials.gov). This database, which has information about all major ongoing clinical trials, provides an excellent overview of recent scientific developments. This site includes information about the type of patients being tested, the new treatment, the study objectives, and contact information for the sponsor and the lead investigator.

**Key messages**

- The key source of information on treatment options should be your physician.
- Textbooks are good sources for information on diseases, but they may not have the latest information on more recently developed treatment options.
- Reliable information may be found by critically searching independent Web sites.
- Information also is available through the Internet about ongoing research studies testing new treatments.