FINDING HEALTH INFORMATION ONLINE

Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland

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This factsheet contains information on accessing health information online, including how to effectively search for reliable, helpful information online and how to find support on social media.

It is aimed at anyone who is uncertain or uncomfortable with using online searches and/or social media.

This factsheet is produced by Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland **www.chss.org.uk**
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KEY POINTS

- Information on all sorts of health conditions, treatments, and services is available online.
- Not all information online is true or accurate - it is important to be careful!
- You can use a search engine like Google or Bing to find information. If you use Google, you can use the "Tools" button to narrow down your search results.
- Signs of whether information is reliable include: who produced it and why, whether it is written in a scientific way, and whether it agrees with other sources. Look for the PIF TICK mark to show that an organisation meets a high standard for health information.
- Reading medical and scientific papers can help you to confirm information, but some papers are more reliable than others.
- Generative AI can be used to create quick, cheap information, which may be misleading. There are some hints that information might be AI-generated, but no sure way to know. The best protection against misinformation is to check against other sources.
- You may be able to use social media or YouTube to find personal stories and community.

What can I find online?

Information on almost everything is available online in some form. If you have access to a web browser (the programme you use to access the internet) and an internet connection, you can use it to find:

- Information on your health condition(s) and how to manage them.
- Information on local services, support groups, and clinics.
- Contact details for services near you.
- Forums or social media pages where you can connect with people who have the same condition(s) as you.
- Guidance on healthy living.
- Updates on COVID-19 and other health news.
- Videos to guide you through exercises or other activities.

However, not all information is created equal. There is a lot of misleading or outright false information on the internet.

This factsheet will focus on how to pick out reliable information and check its accuracy, and how to stay safe while finding health information and support online.

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Where to find reliable health information

There are some reliable sources of health information that you can go to directly, which can provide information on health conditions, healthy lifestyles, and treatments.

These are all overseen by professional bodies - such as the NHS, trustworthy charities, or the Scottish or UK government - and the information has been checked and verified.

These sites are a good place to start if you are looking for information on a specific health-related topic:

NHS Inform

www.nhsinform.scot

The central website for information produced by the Scottish NHS. This website covers a huge range of conditions, health concerns, and treatments, and provides information on them in an accessible way.

You can search the website for any health information you need. It is regularly updated and checked by NHS specialists.

You can also call NHS Inform's helpline free at 0800 22 44 88.

CHSS website

www.chss.org.uk

This is Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland's website. Here, we offer online information on all the conditions we cover, as well as advice on healthy living and support living with your health condition(s). You can order print publications, look up CHSS services, and get involved with the charity.

CHSS reviews its health information regularly. You can provide feedback on our information if you feel that something is missing or incorrect. To ask questions, provide feedback on our information, or get involved in the process of developing new booklets, factsheets, or other information you can email **health.information@chss.org.uk**

You can also call our Advice Line for free information and support, on: 0808 801 0899.

PIF TICK

piftick.org.uk/members/tick-members

The PIF TICK is an accreditation scheme for health information. This link leads to a list of organisations which have signed up to the PIF TICK's stringent requirements for trustworthy health information - so you know you can trust their documents.

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British Heart Foundation

www.bhf.org.uk

The British Heart Foundation provides information on a wide range of heart conditions, and support with heart-healthy living. However, as the charity and website are based in England, some information about public services or the law may not apply to Scotland.

Asthma + Lung UK

www.asthmaandlung.org.uk

Asthma + Lung UK specialises in respiratory and chest conditions. It offers information and support on a range of these conditions. However, as the charity and website are based in England, some information about public services or the law may not apply to Scotland.

Different Strokes

www.differentstrokes.co.uk

Different Strokes is a specialist charity for younger people who have experienced stroke, and a great source of information on managing work, education, and other responsibilities following a stroke or TIA. However, as the charity and website are based in England, some information about public services or the law may not apply to Scotland.

Stroke Association

www.stroke.org.uk

The Stroke Association offers information on stroke, TIA, and reducing the risk of future stroke. However, as the charity and website are based in England, some information about public services or the law may not apply to Scotland.

ALLIANCE

www.alliance-scotland.org.uk

The Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland is a central hub for people with long-term health conditions, and for medical staff working with them.

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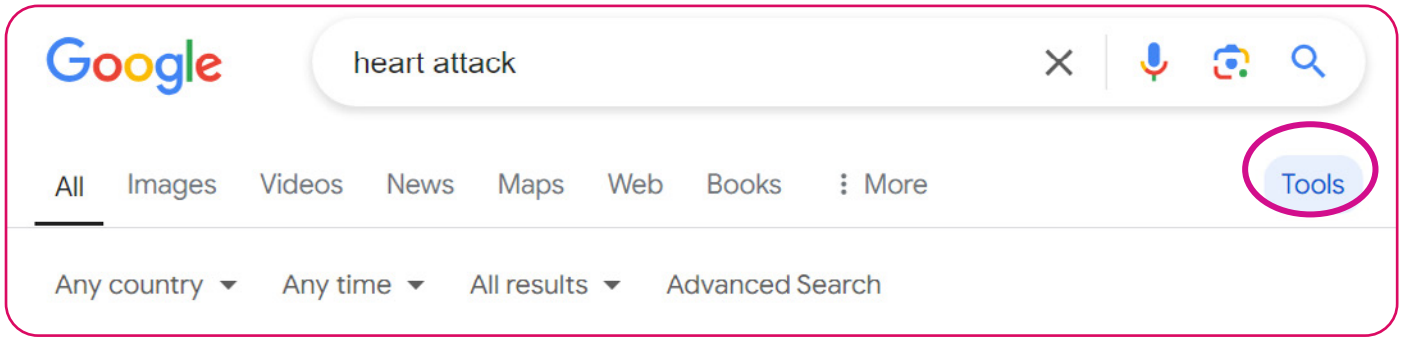
Searching for information

You can use a search engine such as Google, Bing, or Yahoo! to find more information about your condition or how to manage your health.

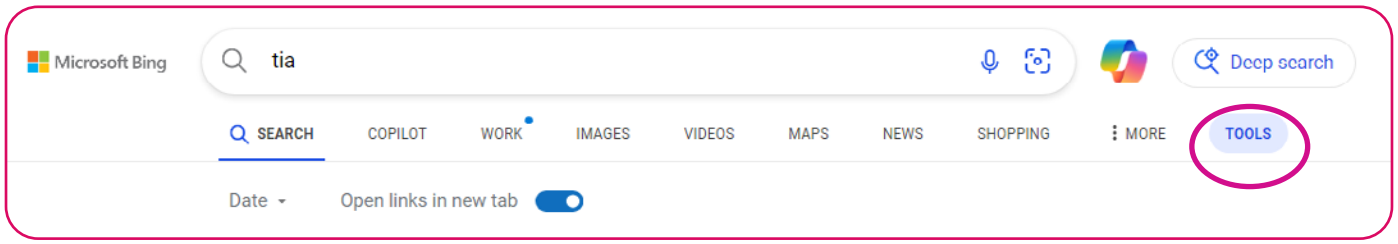
These websites search the whole internet, so they will bring up a lot of information, not all of which will be relevant. There are a few ways that you can make these searches more useful:

- **Pick out key words.** For example "heart attack medication side effects" will usually offer better results than "what are the side effects of heart attack medication?"
- **Use quote marks if you need to search for words in a particular order.** This means that the engine will search for the phrase, rather than looking for the words separately. Searching heart attack will bring up pages that have the words heart and attack anywhere on the page. Searching with the quote marks - "heart attack" - will only look for pages which have those words next to each other.
- If you find you are getting results about something you don't want, **you can use a minus sign to exclude pages from your search.** For instance, searching "heart attack -hospital" will show pages with the words "heart" and "attack", but not the word "hospital".

On Google, you can use the Tools bar (click the button circled below) to narrow down your sources. For instance, you can choose webpages from a certain date range, or ones which are registered in a specific country.



On Bing, you can only narrow sources down by date. Click Tools button (circled below) and then click "Date" to choose how far back in time you want to search.



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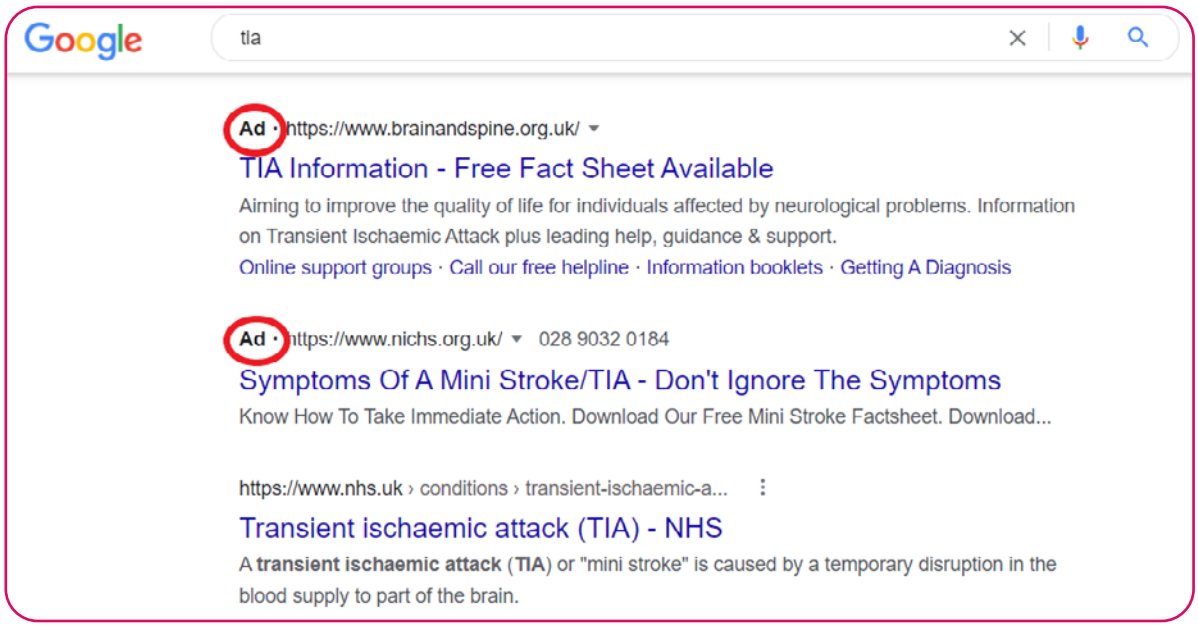
- **Try to use words that websites use.** A lot of the time, websites will use professional language, rather than casual. Mimicking this will help to find what you are looking for.
- **Remember that a lot of websites pay for services** that will make them appear higher up in the results. Often, these are websites that are trying to sell you something, and their information may be biased. Paying for advertising does not mean that a website is misleading - many health charities use this to get their message out there! But it is worth remembering and being aware of this. Look for the word "Ad" or "Sponsored" next to a link, which will tell you they have paid to be boosted.



- **Don't worry about spelling and capitalisation.** Within reason, search engines are usually good at understanding misspelt words - searching **tia strok** will give you the same results as **TIA stroke.**

Remember that there is a lot of misinformation on the internet! Not all of it is malicious. Anyone can share things online, which means that not everyone who writes websites is qualified and there may be misunderstandings.

However, there are also a lot of websites which just want to sell you something, trick you into giving up your details, or get you to click on things. The next pages will give you some hints for making sure that the information you are reading is trustworthy.

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Making sure information is reliable

Not all information online is trustworthy. It is important that you look at information critically and know where the information comes from.

Here are some questions to ask yourself about any information online:

Do I know who the information comes from?

Reliable information usually has sources available. For example, it might link to the NHS or to a scientific study, or it might explain in the text how the writer decided what to include. Look for peer-reviewed information - information which has been looked over by another doctor or health professional before being published.

Do I trust this website?

What is the website as a whole about? Most websites have an "About" page or front page which will tell you what the organisation or person made the website for. Look for charities, government sources, or people who have specialised expertise.

Remember that all real charities in the UK have to list their charity number somewhere on the website! This will usually be at the bottom of the page, and will look like "SC018761" (that's CHSS' number). Charity numbers from England and Wales will not have the "SC" at the start.

Is this selling me something?

If health information offers you a chance to buy a product, a course, or a service be cautious - especially if it isn't one you've heard of. They may just want your money. Consult a doctor before buying any remedies online.

Is the website asking for personal details or a registration?

Some websites use false information to get you to sign up for an account, and/or to give them information which they can sell to other companies. If a website asks for your email, telephone number, full name, credit card details, or any other personal information, consider whether they really need that information.

Does this match other things I've read?

Ultimately, you're best to look through several different sources of information if you can. Most trustworthy information will be backed up by several sources, including professional ones like NHS Inform or Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland. If you find information on a website that's contradicted elsewhere, be cautious!

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When was this information produced?

Information that was accurate a few years or even months ago might now be out of date, and health advice changes to reflect that. Check the date of the material to see how recently it was published. Many sources of consumer health information will include both a publication date and a review date. For instance, all CHSS leaflets are checked every three years.

Where is it from?

In some cases, like general scientific research, the country of origin does not matter. However, remember that the medications, services, and legal approaches may differ in different countries. Look at the extensions at the end of the web address to confirm a website is UK-based. UK ones are **.scot, .gov.uk, .org.uk,** or **.co.uk**

Is it well-written?

"Well-written" is, of course, a matter of taste - but information that contains a lot of spelling, grammar, or typesetting errors is often a sign of a less reliable source. Professional, peer-reviewed sources are much more likely to notice and remove these kinds of minor errors, since many people will have looked over the information.

The PIF-TICK mark

The PIF-TICK programme is a UK-wide quality mark for health information, which is used by charities, the NHS, and other health organisations to prove that their information meets a high standard of:

- **Clarity and accessibility**
- **Information accuracy**
- **Impartiality**
- **Up-to-date reviews**
- **Accountability and evidence**

Looking for the PIF-TICK logo (see above) is one way to check whether information is reliable. However, the PIF-TICK programme is still fairly new, so not all reliable information providers will have signed up to it yet.

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Reading medical papers

You may find it helpful to look into primary scientific research to back up your understanding. Here are some questions to ask about scientific papers:

What kind of study was this?

Is this paper a literature review: a comparison of previously published papers about the subject? An experimental study: a report on an experiment designed to test a hypothesis? Or a case study: a report on a single example of the thing being discussed, like a patient or specific area?

Is this from a reliable, peer-reviewed journal?

Check where the paper was originally published. Reliable papers should always be subject to peer review before being published.

How many times did they do the experiment?

The more subjects are involved in an experiment, or the more times a study is repeated, the more likely the results are to be reliable. Look for the N-value, which tells you how many subjects were included in the study.

What are the results compared against?

Experimental studies should always have a control group. This may be a group that is given no treatment, or a group that is given a placebo. In general, the best studies are double-blind (neither the subjects of the experiment nor the people giving them the treatment know which group is the control group) and use placebos. This makes it less likely that the results will be affected by what the subjects of the experiment think the results should be.

Does the conclusion match the data?

Look at the question the paper was trying to answer (the hypothesis) and the data collected. Does the conclusion look like one you would reach from the same data?

Does this paper make any huge claims?

Most genuine scientific evidence comes in unremarkable packages. A paper that claims to prove that a drug "reduces tumor growth in rat models" is more reliable than one that uses the same data and experiment to claim that the drug "cures cancer!"

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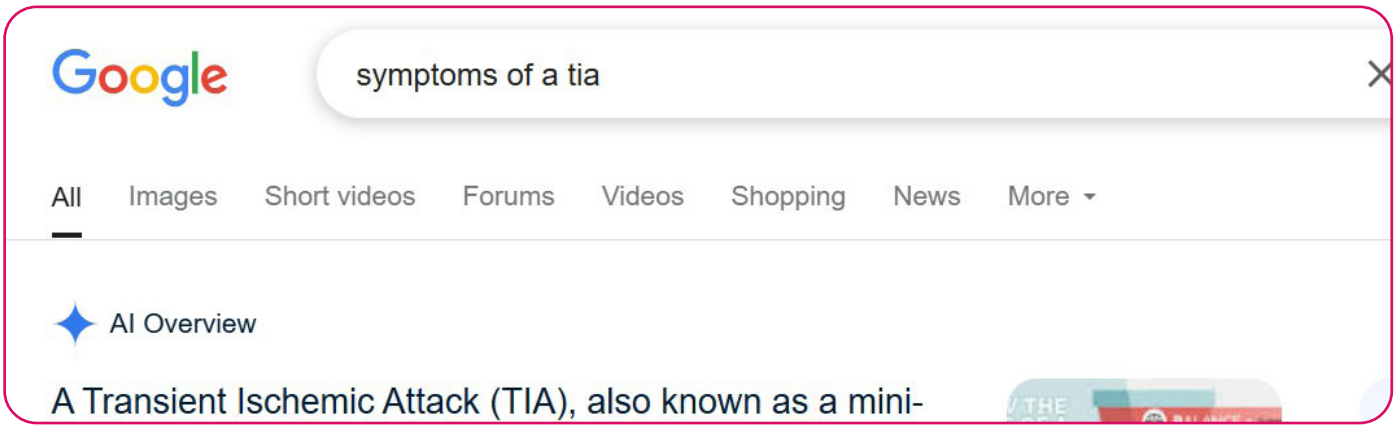
Recognising AI-generated information

Generative AI, like ChatGPT, is increasingly easy to access and use. These programmes produce text or images in response to a prompt. Since AI is much faster and cheaper than getting a trained professional to write articles, it is increasingly used by companies online.

Increasingly search engines, like google, are including an AI overview as the first result. This can be useful when looking up small queries but should not be relied upon for health information. They may provide misleading or inaccurate information. It's always important to scroll below this overview to find information from a reliable source like the NHS or Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland website.



AI programmes do not understand what they are writing about, and are frequently wrong about the facts. They patch together random information which they have accessed before, and put it together in a new order. This can be very convincing, and sometimes even useful, but poorly-checked AI text may misrepresent the facts or "hallucinate" - that is, create facts which are not based on anything.

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Recognising AI writing

All of the below are common traits of AI writing in 2025. **None of these points guarantee that you are reading AI-generated writing.** All of them can be found in human writing too. However, the more of these traits you notice, the more likely it is that AI was involved.

- **Repetitive writing.** AI often repeats the same ideas, phrases, and concepts over and over again within the course of the same article. AI may also use the same kind of sentence structure all the time. If the same kind of sentence shows up repeatedly, particularly if those sentences are awkwardly phrased, it may be a hint that AI is involved.

- **Overuse of certain words and phrases.** AI tends to show a preference for certain words. Some words which have been picked up by Reddit users as AI tells include:
    - "Crucially" and "essentially".
    - "Firstly", "moreover", and "furthermore".
    - "It is important to consider" and "It's worth noting that".

  Words and phrases such as the above, used frequently and/or incorrectly, can suggest AI use.

- **Inaccurate facts.** If you notice a fact which is well-known or easily-researched, but which the article still has wrong, this may suggest it comes from AI. Even if it is not AI, do you want to trust your health to someone who does not even Google their facts before including them?

- **Lack of personality.** Even in professional writing, real people usually have a clear "voice" in their writing - they may use sarcasm, turns of phrase, or pop culture references. Their writing will reflect their own life experiences and expertise, keep a clear through-line, and you will probably be able to tell their opinions, even if they are trying to be neutral. AI is unable to do any of this. AI writing is usually very dry and stiff, with an impersonal tone and a generic way of writing.

- **Generic, vague information with a lot of filler words.** "Filler words" are any words which do not add information - the sort of thing you might add to an essay to reach a word count. AI information is typically full of these filler words and phrases, and the information given can be too vague and impersonal to be useful. AI often fails to connect concepts, so AI articles might lack a clear connection between ideas, or be unable to support an argument.

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Recognising AI images and videos

AI can also create images and videos. We are often more likely to believe what we see than what we read, but AI images are even more likely to be incorrect or misleading than AI writing.

AI videos can vary in quality. AI can be a way to animate and voice videos quickly, and might be used to provide visuals for a well-researched video written by a real person. However, it can also be used to create videos from scratch, and these videos are prone to all the same mistakes and inaccuracies as AI-generated text articles.

There are things that can suggest an image or video is partially or entirely AI-generated. Look for:

- **Difficulty with writing.** Image-generating AIs often struggle to include readable text. Common signs of AI include: nonsense text in an image or diagram, letters not looking quite like real letters, or odd spaces and marks in the middle of writing.
- **Strange voiceover delivery.** AI voices can sound quite convincing. However, because they do not understand what they are saying, they will often deliver voiceovers or other lines strangely. They may pronounce words oddly, or they may have the same tone and way of speaking regardless of what they are saying. They will not take pauses where a person would pause while reading something, such as between points on a list or in the middle of a very long sentence.
- **Bad anatomy.** AI still struggles with aspects of human anatomy, particularly hands and faces. If you notice that a hand has the wrong number of fingers, or that a face is unnaturally symmetrical, it may be a sign of AI.
- **Unnatural movement** or **lack of consistency in animation.** If people look different from moment to moment, or if the way that people move is jerky or strangely smooth, it may indicate that the animation is AI-generated.
- **Oddly merged or separated objects.** AI does not recognise different objects in an image. The following are common examples of this. Hair strands or clothing that appear to be growing out of a person's skin. Objects in the foreground melting into the background. Or an object passing through another object in a way that should not be possible.
- **Implausible images.** If something looks too strange to be real, it might not be! Check the description and use your own judgement to work out whether it is real. AI can make very realistic "photographs", so it is important to be cautious and not believe everything you see.

Remember, being AI-generated does not mean everything in a piece of information is untrue! It just means that you should be more careful with the information, and double-check it against other sources.

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Finding health support on social media

If you use social media, you may be able to find an online support group of people experiencing the same health condition or concerns as you.

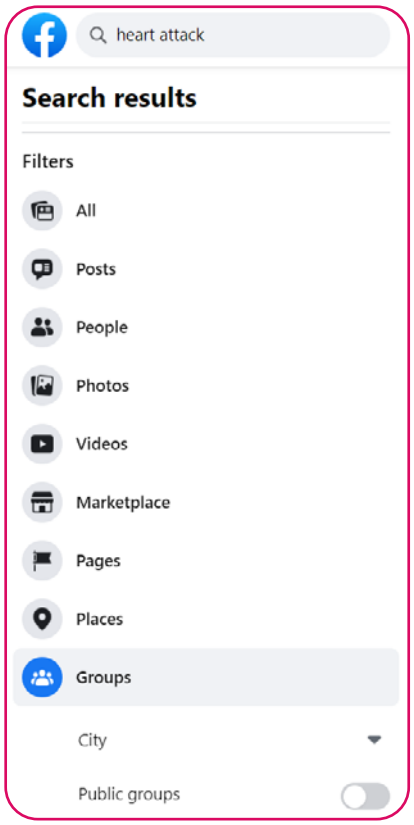
The best places to look for these groups are on Facebook and Reddit.

You may also be able to search hashtags on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram to find posts people have made about the subject. For example, typing "#heartattack" or "#tia" into the search bar.

Remember that social media is an open forum. This makes it a great place to hear people's experiences, but usually not a good place to find reliable, factual information.

Just because somebody has said it on social media, does not mean it is true. You should be extra careful about deciding whether to trust information you have found on social media.

Facebook



You can filter search results on Facebook by choosing "Groups" from the list of filters on the left side of your screen (image on the left). This will narrow your results down to groups, rather than individual users or posts.

You can also narrow it down further by using the options:

City: You can select where you live from the drop-down menu, to show groups based near you.

Public groups: Turning this option on will show you only groups whose posts you can see without joining. If you do not turn this on, you will also see private groups, where you will have to click the "Join Group" button to see and comment on posts.

When you look at the search results, they will tell you whether a group is public or private, how many members it has, and a little bit about the group.

When you join a group, the posts will show up on your friends page, and you will be able to post and make comments to the group.

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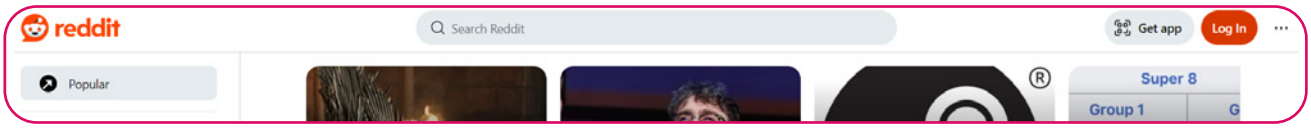
Reddit

Reddit is a slightly unusual social media platform because it is actually many different discussion forums linked together. This means that there may be a forum (or "subreddit") dedicated to your condition or people with similar conditions. For example, there is a subreddit for people who have had a heart attack (**reddit.com/r/heartattack**) and one for people who have had a stroke (**reddit.com/r/stroke**)

These subreddits are places where anyone can post their stories or comment on other posts. You will need a Reddit account to post or comment, but you can view the posts on most subreddits without needing to sign in.

To find out if there is a subreddit associated with your health condition, go to **www.reddit.com** and type your search term into the search bar at the top of the page:



When you enter your search term, you may see a drop-down which lists existing communities on that topic. For instance, typing in "long covid" gets:

From here, you can either click on one of the options in the drop-down to go to that subreddit, or press enter to search the whole site - this will show you posts that mention the thing you searched for, as well as subreddits about it.

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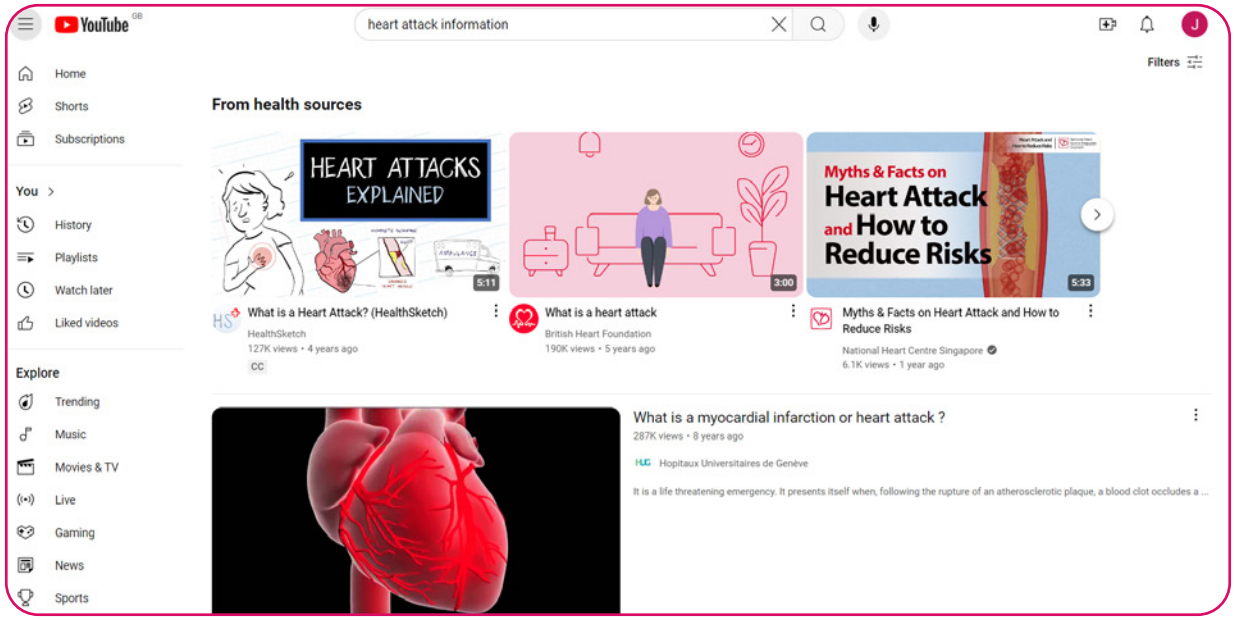
Videos on YouTube

YouTube can be a great source for tutorials and videos. It can also help you to find information if you struggle to read or if words are difficult for you to process.

Search YouTube by clicking the search field in the top of the screen, and typing in what you are looking for. The more specific you are, the better - for example, in the screenshot below, you might notice we have searched "heart attack information" rather than "heart attack".



YouTube has recently added the "**From health sources**" section in certain health-related searches, as you can see in the screenshot above. This highlights videos from trusted healthcare sources, such as charities or medical providers. These videos are more likely to contain accurate, useful information.

One thing which people often use YouTube videos for is guidance with exercises. This is not a replacement for visiting an occupational therapist or physiotherapist. However, it can help you to practise exercises at home.

Although you can leave comments if you have a YouTube account, this should never be a replacement for asking your doctor! If you have questions about your health, or if you want to know if something applies to your situation, a stranger on the internet is not in a good place to help you. Go to a health care professional who knows your case and your circumstances.

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You can also go to our website for information, advice and support: **www.chss.org.uk**

Find a range of easy-to-read booklets and factsheets at our resources hub: **www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub**

Scan here to see all our resources!

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