

## Online dating

In the age of the internet many people choose to use online dating services and on-line chat rooms to hook up. It can be a fun way of meeting new people and of gradually finding out if they are someone you would like to meet in the real world. Remember that you are never obligated to meet anyone - regardless of your level of online intimacy. Not everyone is who they say they are. How do you protect yourself? How can you reduce your risk of a bad experience without becoming paranoid?

### Dating tips

1. Use your head not just your heart. If you get a bad feeling about someone listen to it.
2. Never give out your personal contact details. This includes your permanent email address, home phone number, home address or work address. If things do not work out it reduces the risk of stalking. Always use a double blind messaging service either on the dating site or somewhere like Facebook or Myspace. Protect your identity until you decide to reveal it.
3. Never wire money overseas – you may well be taken advantage of or even doing something illegal which could get you into trouble. If you intend to meet up overseas, remember to consult your immigration authorities first and choose an appropriate place to meet up (see tips on the first date).
4. Ask lots of questions before agreeing to meet in person. Give some thought to:
  - Do they answer the questions you ask?
  - How old are they? In Australia, if you are 18 years or older, it is against the law to use the internet to procure or "groom" children under the age of 16 for sex.
  - Do they avoid answering certain questions such as if they are married or in a relationship?
  - Avoid discussing your financial status. Keep to topics like hobbies, sports or what your plans are for the future.
  - Think of your first get-together as a meeting not a date. After all that is what you are doing meeting to assess chemistry and see if you like each other at all.
5. The next step from messaging may be to get involved in an online chat. Try to do it in a group setting. It's a good way to help break the ice and to stop things getting too hot and heavy too quickly. Seeing how the other person reacts to others can also tell you a lot about them in another anonymous setting.

For tips about picking a good online dating agency see:

### Photos

- When sending a photo of yourself be aware that this is their first introduction to their sense of who you are. If you send a photo that portrays you in a sexualized way then that is how they will think of you.
- When they send you their photos think about are they "Too good to be true"? For instance are they very good looking or out of your specified age requirements?
- If you ask for a photo of them in a different setting such as outdoors somewhere and all you get are excuses then you might want to wonder why they are reluctant to send you another photo.
- If you are under the age of 18 and you send a photo of yourself that portrays you in a sexualized way then you and the recipient of the photo may be breaking the law.

### Email addresses

- When you feel comfortable enough to give out an email address, set up a disposable account with a service like hotmail or yahoo. If things do not work out you can just shut it down.
- Never give out your work email address.
- If you have to give them a phone number, give them a mobile number which cannot be traced to your home address.

## The first date

- Consider bringing friends or a friend on the first date. This can help to reduce tension and offers a much safer environment.
- Make your own way to and from the date or, better still, organise for a friend to come and pick you up.
- If you are feeling unsafe do not be afraid to leave. Your safety is much more important than someone else's opinion of you.
- Let friends and family know where you are and what time you will be getting home and that you are meeting someone from the internet. Alternately, make a note about the person you are meeting, how you got to know him or her, and place this information where it can be found.
- Always carry a mobile phone and cab fare.
- ALWAYS meet physically for the first time in a public place such as a café or a shopping mall.
- NEVER meet someone you have not physically met before in a place where there are no members of the public present.
- Do not drink anything that you have not seen prepared. Do not leave your open drink container unattended. Where possible order a bottle of drink that you pour for yourself and reseal it.
- Make sure you are not followed when leaving the place of the meeting - especially if no one has shown up.
- Pay for yourself.

If the person you have just met starts to talk about being in financial difficulty or needing money, be cautious, they could be trying to scam you.

Just like in the real world, if someone gets angry with you for no reasons, becomes possessive or tries to control you this could be a warning. If they try to be inappropriately physical or intimate either online or on the phone you have the right to say no and either hang up or cease interaction with them.

If you plan to meet someone interstate, arrange for your own hotel room and do not tell your date the name of your hotel. Get a rental car at the airport and drive directly to your hotel. Ask hotel staff for information about your meeting point – is it public and safe? Before you go and meet someone you have not met before leave a message with details of where you are going and who you are meeting at the hotel.