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A Guide to Understanding and Safely Using Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools

AGEWELL

NIA NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON AGEING

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About the National Institute on Ageing

Founded in 2016, the National Institute on Ageing (NIA) is celebrating a decade of impact in our mission to improve the lives of older adults and the systems that support them. Over the past 10 years, the NIA has become Canada's leading voice on ageing policy — convening stakeholders, conducting research, advancing policy solutions and practice innovations, sharing information and shifting attitudes. Our vision remains clear: a Canada where older adults feel valued, included, supported and better prepared to age with confidence.

About AGE-WELL

AGE-WELL is Canada's Technology and Aging Network. As a dynamic pan-Canadian network with global reach, AGE-WELL has mobilized a vast community of researchers, older adults, caregivers, partner organizations and future leaders to accelerate the delivery of technology-based solutions that make a meaningful difference in the lives of older Canadians and their caregivers. AGE-WELL serves as a catalyst for technological innovation that supports healthy aging while driving Canada's growing AgeTech sector.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is becoming a regular part of our daily lives. It helps power internet search engines, online shopping, social media and navigation applications or "apps," as well as tools like ChatGPT. This guide provides a general introduction to AI, with a particular focus on AI chatbots and similar tools. While AI can be useful, it is important to understand how it works, what it can and cannot do, and how to use it safely.

This guide has been designed primarily for adults aged 50 and older, no matter how much experience they have with using digital technologies. It is meant for both beginners and those who already feel comfortable using digital devices. While this guide was developed with older adults in mind, anyone who wants to learn more about AI may find it useful.

This guide is designed to help you build basic AI literacy skills. By the end of this guide, you will learn:

- What AI is and where it is used
- How to use AI tools effectively
- How to check whether AI-generated information is reliable
- Important privacy, safety and ethical considerations
- How AI tools can be used safely in health-related situations

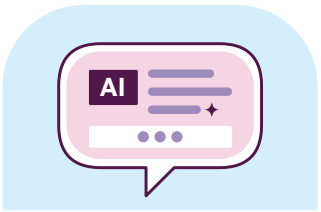
Key Terms

Term	What It Means
Artificial Intelligence (AI)	Technology that helps computers do tasks that usually require human thinking, such as recognizing patterns, answering questions or making suggestions.
Chatbot	A computer program that can have conversations with people by answering questions or responding to messages. Examples include ChatGPT, Google Gemini and Microsoft Copilot.
Prompt	The question, instruction or message you give to an AI tool.
Bias	A tendency toward certain viewpoints or outcomes that may be unfair or inaccurate.
Misinformation	False or inaccurate information that may be shared unintentionally.
Source	The place where information comes from, such as a website, article, book or organization.
Verification	The process of checking whether information is accurate by comparing it with trusted sources.

Part 1: What Is AI?

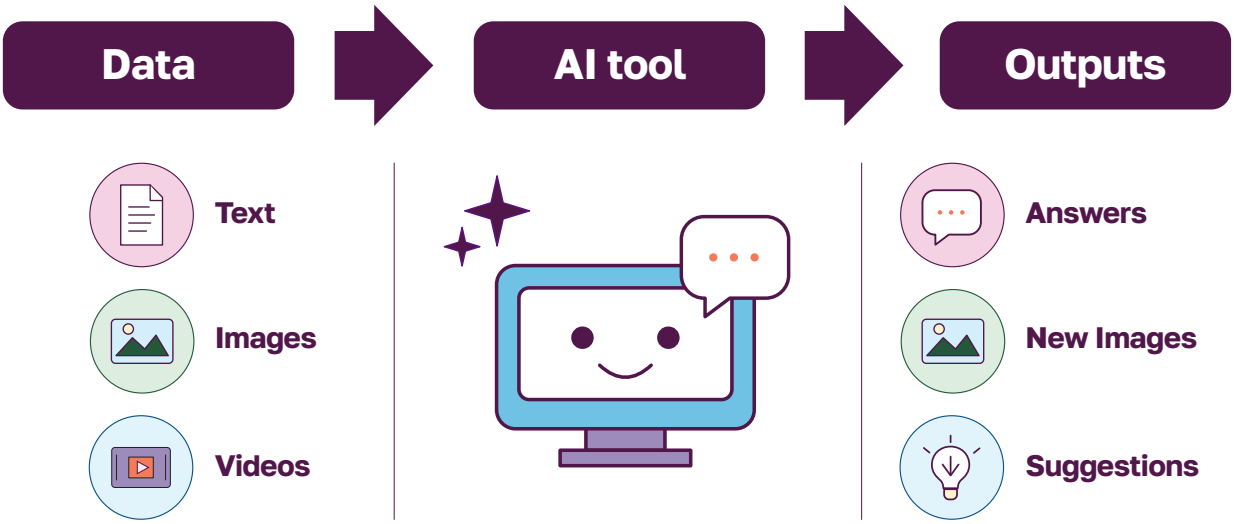
Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a type of technology that helps computers do tasks that usually need human thinking, such as understanding language, recognizing pictures, making predictions or answering questions.





AI is like a digital helper that supports everyday tasks

AI works by learning from lots of information, also called data, and finding patterns on its own instead of being given exact instructions.



Examples of What AI Can Do

AI tools can help with everyday tasks



- **Create human-like text**. AI tools like ChatGPT, Google Gemini and Microsoft Copilot can help answer questions, explain topics or write text.
- **Understand images.** Some AI tools can help understand pictures and videos, such as recognizing faces, types of movement or helping doctors analyze medical images.
- **Make recommendations.** AI tools can suggest things you may like based on what you have watched, searched for or clicked on before, such as videos, products or social media posts.

There are many different AI tools, and they can vary in writing style, cost, functions, and how they handle privacy. We encourage you to try out a few different AI tools to see which fits your needs and preferences.

Part 2: Where You May Be Using AI



You may already be using AI tools in your daily life, including:

Voice Assistants

- Tools like Siri, Alexa or Google Assistant Example: asking them, "What is the weather forecast for today?"

Chatbots

- Tools like ChatGPT, Google Gemini or Microsoft Copilot
  Example: asking them questions or writing messages

Search Engines

- Tools like Google
  Example: using them to provide a quick summary of relevant information on your search topic

Navigation Apps

- Tools that provide maps and directions
  Example: using them to find the fastest route

Online Recommendations

- News, shopping, entertainment or social media sites that also provide suggestions
  Example: using suggested articles, products or videos to help decide what to read, buy or watch

Many AI-enabled technologies work in the background, so you may not always notice them.

Pause and Reflect

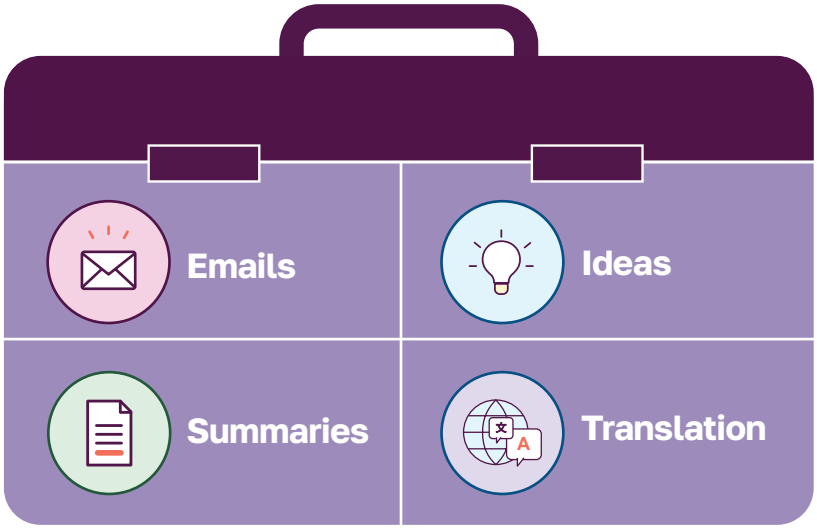
Where have you noticed AI in your daily life?

What is one low-risk task you would like an AI tool to help you try?

My Notes:

Part 3: How AI Tools Can Be Helpful

AI Toolbox



Some AI tools, especially AI chatbots, can be useful for everyday tasks. They can help you find information, organize ideas, write text or prepare questions.

AI Chatbots and Similar Tools Can Help With

- Summarizing long documents or information
- Writing emails and messages
- Brainstorming ideas
- Learning new topics
- Translating languages
- Preparing questions to ask a doctor, lawyer, financial advisor or other professional
- Comparing products, services or travel options

Sample Prompts to Try

Here are examples of instructions you could give to an AI chatbot:

Writing emails and messages

"Help me write a polite email to reschedule my appointment. Keep it short and respectful."

Brainstorming ideas

"Give me 5 simple ideas for healthy lunches using eggs, bread, tomatoes and cheese."

Comparing options

"Compare these two phone plans in simple language. Tell me the main differences, possible hidden costs and what questions I should ask before choosing."

Tips for Better AI Tool Interactions

AI chatbots and similar tools usually give better answers when your questions are clear and you guide the response.

Be specific.

✗ "Tell me about scams."

✓ "What are three warning signs of a text message scam?"

Give relevant details or context

✗ "Write an email."

✓ "Write a short, polite email asking to reschedule my appointment."

Guide the answer by asking the AI chatbot or tool to:

- Provide sources
- Explain the answer in plain language
- Identify risks, limitations or other viewpoints that are missing

Part 4: Understanding the Limits of AI

AI tools can be helpful, but they are not perfect. It is important to know what they can get wrong. AI tools can:

- **Make mistakes.** AI tools can give answers that are wrong, outdated or incomplete.
- **Create or spread misinformation.** AI tools can create text, images, videos and audio that seem real but are false.
- **Show bias. AI tools learn from data.** If the data is incomplete or biased, their answers may be too.
- **Sound confident even when wrong**. An AI tool may sound sure of itself, but that does not mean the answer is correct.
- **Reinforce your views or beliefs.** AI tools may show information that matches your views or beliefs, to try to please you and keep you engaged longer with them.
- **Lead to trust and over-reliance.** It can be easy to depend too much on AI tools. They should support your thinking, not replace your judgment.
- **Raise privacy and safety concerns.** AI tools may store and reuse your information and share it with others.

Part 5: Recognizing AI-Generated Content

AI-generated content can be difficult to recognize, especially when it is not clearly labelled. Look for clues but remember that no single clue can confirm that something was created by AI.

- **Look for an AI label.** Some websites and apps identify content as AI-generated, AI-assisted, or Made with AI. These labels may not always be present or easy to find.

Where AI Labels May Appear

Labels may not always be easy to find.



- **Pay attention to the source.** Content shared by an unfamiliar person, account, or website may require extra caution. A familiar or trusted source does not guarantee that content is real, but knowing where something came from can provide a useful clue.
- **Notice unusual or unrealistic details.** Sometimes AI-generated images, videos, or audio contain details that seem strange or don't make sense. If something seems unusual, double-check it rather than assuming it is real or AI-generated.

Part 6: How to Check AI-Generated Answers

AI chatbots and similar tools can sound confident even when they are wrong. Before trusting or acting on AI-generated information, use the **VERIFY** method.

V **Validate the source.**

Ask AI chatbots or tools for their sources. Then check whether the sources actually exist and support the claims being made.

E **Examine for accuracy.**

Compare the information with trusted sources, such as official government, health, financial or community organization websites (see Part 11).

R **Recognize confidence vs. correctness.**

A confident answer is not always a correct answer.

I **Identify what is missing.**

Ask whether the answer leaves out important details, risks, limitations or other viewpoints.

Example: “What are the arguments for and against this approach?”

F **Follow up with an expert.**

For important decisions, talk to a qualified professional or the relevant organization directly.

Y **Your decision.**

After checking the information, decide whether to act, or keep checking.

Part 7: How to Use AI Tools Safely

Using AI tools safely means protecting your privacy, watching for scams and knowing when AI tools should not be used.

Protect Your Personal Information

Do not share private or sensitive information, such as:

- Passwords or security answers
- Banking, credit card or insurance information
- Health information, medical records or health card numbers
- Social Insurance Numbers or other government identification
- Legal documents or private contact information
- Information about another person without their permission

Watch for Scams and Fraud

AI tools can be used to create fake messages, images, voices or videos that look or sound real.

Be cautious if a message:

- Asks for money or personal information
- Pressures you to act quickly
- Asks you to click a suspicious link
- Says you won a prize
- Claims to be from a family member in trouble
- Asks you to keep something secret

If you are unsure, stop. Do not reply, click a link or use contact information in the message. Check with a trusted person or contact the organization you think you are dealing with directly using a phone number or website you know is real.

Know When Not to Use AI Tools

AI tools should not be used:

- As your only source of information.
- To diagnose a health concern or provide treatment advice.
- To provide financial or legal advice.
- To replace advice from a qualified health care professional, lawyer or financial advisor.

To make critical or emergency decisions (ask yourself: “Is a human expert better for this?”

Part 8: AI Tools and Your Health

AI Tools vs. Health Care Professionals



AI Tools

- General Info
- General Advice



Health Care Professionals

- Diagnosis
- Treatment Decisions
- Personal Advice

AI tools can help explain – but not replace a qualified health care professional.

Some AI tools, including AI chatbots, can help you learn about general health topics, but they should not replace a doctor, nurse practitioner, pharmacist or other qualified health care professional.

Healthcare professionals may use specialized AI tools as part of their work, but this does not mean you should use AI tools to diagnose symptoms or replace professional assessments.

AI Tools Can Help With:

- Learning a plain-language overview of health conditions.
- Understanding medical terms.
- Preparing questions for a health care appointment.
- Learning about general wellness topics.

AI Tools Should Not Replace:

- A qualified health care professional's medical diagnosis.
- A qualified health care professional's advice on a personalized treatment or care plan.
- A qualified mental health professional's counselling or support.
- The delivery of emergency care – in these cases, always call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department.

Safer Ways to Ask AI Tools About Health

The examples below show how small changes in wording can make a health-related prompt safer, clearer and more useful.

Less Safe Way to Ask	Safer Way to Ask
✗ "Do I have atrial fibrillation?"	✓ "Explain what the signs and symptoms of atrial fibrillation are in simple terms."
✗ "Should I stop taking this medication?"	✓ "What questions should I ask my doctor about this medication?"
✗ "I feel dizzy. Tell me what condition I have."	✓ "What are common causes of dizziness in older adults and when should someone seek medical help?"

Be cautious if an AI chatbot or tool:

- Promises a "miracle cure" or uses "one simple trick" languages.
- Does not mention possible risks or side effects.
- Contradicts advice from your health care professional.
- Mentions studies you cannot find.

For general health information, cross-check an AI tool's responses with trusted sources. If information concerns you or seems important to your health, bring it up with your health care professional as a question - for example, "I came across this information and was wondering if it applies to me."

Part 9: Building Your AI Skills

Learning about AI takes time, and it is normal to feel unsure at first. You can build confidence by starting with simple tasks, practicing and checking information before relying on it.

Level 1: Learn the Basics

- Understand what AI is.
- Notice where AI is used in your daily life.
- Try one AI chatbot (for example, ChatGPT or Google Gemini) with a simple question, such as "What is the weather forecast for today?"

Level 2: Practical Application

- Use an AI chatbot or similar tool to help with a practical task: drafting an email, summarizing an article or preparing questions for an appointment with someone you are seeking advice from.
- Practice writing specific, detailed prompts.

Level 3: Evaluate AI Tools

- Test AI tools with questions you already know to see how accurate they are.
- Ask about a controversial topic and evaluate whether the answer is balanced.
- Ask the same question to two different AI tools and compare the responses for differences, sources, missing information and possible bias.
- Practice the VERIFY method on the answers you receive.

Level 4: Stay Informed

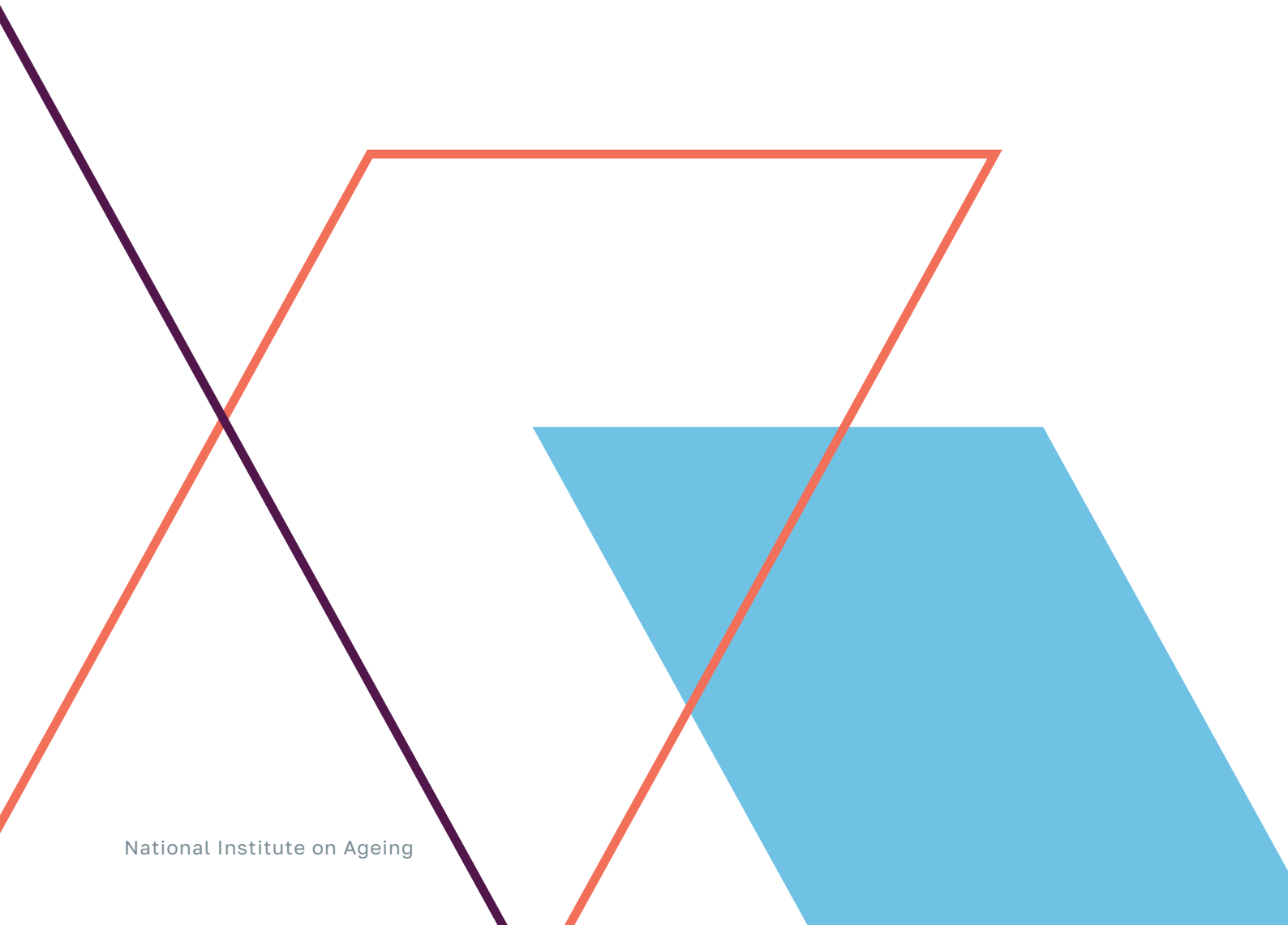
- Keep learning as AI and AI tools change.
- Pay attention to how AI is used in health care, banking and delivering news.
- Share what you learn with others. Practice with friends or groups.

My Next Step

One AI task I will try: _____

One question I still have: _____

A person or resource that can support me: _____



Part 10: Key Takeaways



AI can be a helpful tool. It can support daily tasks, such as finding information, learning new things, writing messages, summarizing text and preparing questions.



AI tools are not always correct. They can make mistakes, provide outdated information or sound confident even when they are wrong.



Always verify important information. Check AI-generated information with trusted sources before acting on it.



Protect your personal information. Be cautious about what you share. Do not share passwords, banking details, health information or other private information.



Practice builds confidence. Learning improves over time. Start with simple, low-risk tasks and ask for help when needed.



Use AI tools with your own judgment. AI tools should support your own thinking, not replace it. Do not rely on them completely.

Part 11: Trusted Sources

The following resources can help you learn more about online safety, scams, health information and digital technology.

Online Safety and Scams

Government of Canada – Get Cyber Safe
Learn how to stay safe online, protect your personal information and recognize scams.

https://www.getcybersafe.gc.ca

MediaSmarts
A Canadian organization that provides easy-to-understand information about digital technology, media and online risks.

https://mediasmarts.ca

Canadian Anti-Fraud Centre
Find up-to-date information on common scams and how to protect yourself, including frauds that may use new technologies like AI.

https://www.antifraudcentre-centreantifraude.ca

Security Considerations for Voice-Activated Digital Assistants
For further reading on voice-activated digital assistant security.

https://www.cyber.gc.ca/en/guidance/security-considerations-voice-activated-digital-assistants-itsap70013

Health Information

Health Canada
Official Government of Canada health information, including health products and safety information.

https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada.html

Public Health Agency of Canada
Information on public health, disease prevention and health promotion.

https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health.html

Your provincial or territorial health website
Use your province or territory's official health website for local health programs and services.

Your health care professional
For personal medical questions, contact your doctor, nurse practitioner, pharmacist or another qualified health care professional.

Financial Information

Financial Consumer Agency of Canada
Information about financial literacy, consumer rights, banking and protecting yourself financially.

https://www.canada.ca/en/financial-consumer-agency.html

General Fact-Checking

Snopes
A fact-checking website that can help you check rumours, viral stories and online claims.

https://www.snopes.com

A tip for checking information

For important information — especially about health, money, legal issues, safety or government services — confirm what an AI tool tells you using an official source or a qualified professional.

For news or current events, compare information across more than one trusted source instead of relying only on an AI-generated answer.

AI Tool Access and Help

AI tools provide guidance on how to access a tool or learn how to begin. Many tools offer a free option, but account requirements, features and costs can change.

ChatGPT - OpenAI
A beginner-friendly lesson explaining how to open ChatGPT, enter a first prompt and continue a conversation.

https://openai.com/academy/getting-started

Gemini - Google
Official help for accessing and using Gemini apps, including account, privacy and activity settings.

https://support.google.com/gemini/#topic=15280100

Microsoft Copilot
Official help for accessing Copilot in a web browser or app and understanding sign-in options.

https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-copilot/getting-started-with-microsoft-copilot

Part 12: Quick AI Use Reference Card

Keep this near your computer or phone. Before acting on AI-generated information, use VERIFY.

VERIFY before you trust an AI tool

V 

Validate the source.
Can I verify the source?

E 

Examine for accuracy.
Does this match what trusted sources say?

R 

Recognize confidence vs. correctness.
Did I focus on what was said, instead of how confidently it was said?

I 

Identify what is missing.
Are the risks, limitations, dates or other viewpoints included?

F 

Follow up with an expert.
Should I check with a qualified professional before acting?

Y 

Your decision.
Should I use this information, keep checking, ask for help or ignore it?

Remember: If any of these questions raise concerns or leave you unsure, pause and verify before acting.