

You need an insurance policy —now.

It seems like a good idea to hop online, grab the policy with the best rate and forget about it. So, you do it. Then, something happens, and you start reading the fine print.

That's when you realize that the policy might have been a good price, but didn't offer the coverage you need—or thought you were getting.

Navigating sites can be tricky. Each insurance site offers different plans and policies.

The cost may be prominent, but the actual coverage details are not. Consumers must be vigilant before buying online, otherwise they might get stuck with a less-than-perfect plan.

With some online companies, live agents aren't always available when consumers need them most.

“Do your research online and then buy from an agent in your community,” said Trusted Choice insurance agent Tom Greco of the UNICO Group in Papillion. “Agents can give you more details of what each policy will provide. Independent agents are able to share a variety of policy choices offered by different companies.”

Before you buy any insurance policies online, consider these points:

- Test your knowledge. Before you start the online hunt, visit [InsureUOnline.org](http://InsureUOnline.org) and take the insurance survey. It will test your knowledge about plans. You might be surprised at what you do - and don't - know.
- Ask for recommendations. Ask friends, family members and social networking contacts which online companies they recommend.
- Check out the competition. Some sites offer price quotes for themselves, as well as competitors. To get accurate information, visit each individual site separately and enter your insurance plan criteria.
- Get the date. Find out when the plan actually starts. Is coverage immediate, or is there a waiting period?
- Find out claim processes. It is important to know how to file a claim through these companies. Is the process easy or cumbersome? Do you file online, or get to deal with a person?
- Make a call. If you have questions that aren't answered on the website, call the company. If they don't offer a telephone number for questions, you may want to keep looking.
- Read the fine print. Sometimes buying online can be difficult. Sites are great to supply seriously low price offerings, but it is sometimes difficult to find specific information about what you're buying. When it comes to insurance plans, make sure you know everything that is covered in the plan you want to buy and compare it with your needs. Does it offer enough? Is there more coverage than you actually need?
- Check out the company. Research the company at AM Best and Consumer Reports. Find out if the Nebraska Better Business Bureau has a good rating for the company and read up on any complaints filed. Also, find out if the online company is independent, or a division of another company. It never hurts to also check out the parent company.
- If it's too good to be true, it probably is. Sometimes the lowest rates are too low to be believed. This is a sign that something is amiss. Find out just how long you get that rate. Is it for a day? Week? Year?

The Internet makes research easy, but buyer beware before you purchase any insurance policies. It is always a good idea to check out policies and pricing with an agent before you make a final choice.

“Understand what you are buying,” Greco said. “Unfortunately the majority of clients have never read the insurance policy itself—and that can lead to improper coverage.”

“Every client is different and protecting your assets is a very important financial obligation to you and your family,” he added. “If you, as a consumer, do not understand what you are buying, it can lead to financial ruin without proper guidance from a professional.”