

FACTSHEET

If you or your family are experiencing issues surrounding fertility, it can feel like the internet is taunting you with online advertisements for products or services related to parenting and children. This article explains why you might see these advertisements online, and more importantly, what you can do to limit them.

What is targeted advertising?

Targeted advertising is the way in which companies use information about users' online browsing habits, online purchases and other information about their interests and preferences in order to provide relevant advertisements about goods and services that a particular user may be interested in.

Why do I see adverts targeted to me and how are they targeted?

When you use search engines, shop online or scroll through your social media, companies may collect information about your browsing habits which in turn may be used to build a "profile" about your preferences and interests. These profiles form a basis for companies to determine which particular products or services would be most relevant to you. Adverts for those products are then served in ad banners and social media posts.

This profile is built from information collected through the websites and apps you use via different methods:

- **Cookies:** these are small data files that are placed on your computer or mobile device when you visit a website. Cookies set by the website owner are called "first party cookies". Cookies set by other parties are called "third party cookies". Not all cookies are created equally, and they all serve different functions. For example, some cookies (often called *essential cookies*) are required for technical reasons in order for the website or app to operate, whereas *advertising cookies* are used to make advertising messages more relevant to you (they also prevent you from receiving the same ad continuously and select advertisements that are based on your interests). You have the right to refuse, block and delete non-essential cookies and how you can do this is explained later in this post.
- **Other tracking technologies:** websites may use other tiny files, similar to cookies, which contain a unique identifier enabling the website operator to track your online activity (for example when you have accessed the website from an online advert on a third party website).

By way of example, if you spend an evening searching for a winter break in Mexico, it would be very likely that you would start to see adverts for holidays in Mexico, for 'winter sun' – or even for Mexican food! Equally, if you spend an evening searching for articles relating to pregnancy, you may start to see adverts relating to products or services related to parenting and children. However, if you're experiencing fertility issues, this type of targeting can feel like a personal attack - but it is important to remember that your personal data 'profile' is actually quite *impersonal*. You have fallen in to the right boxes as far as an online algorithm is concerned and, unfortunately, searching for '*maternity dresses*' and '*Moses baskets*' has made you an attractive target for companies selling those items. The best way to avoid these adverts is to take control of the use of cookies and ensure that you understand your rights under data protection law.

Also, it is important to remember that some adverts you may see will be determined based on the fact that you are part of a particular demographic - this is where targeted advertising becomes slightly less nuanced and more generic. For example, you are much more likely to see an advert for pregnancy testing if you are browsing a website for a magazine in which the readership is stereotypically females between the ages of 18-30, rather than if you are browsing a website for a clothing store that only sells male clothes.

How do I reduce the amount of targeted advertising I see?

It may not always be possible to stop targeted advertising completely but there are ways to control and reduce it by following these steps:

- 1. Review the privacy notice and cookie notice on websites and apps:** This should explain the types of personal information the company collects about you when you use its website and how it uses cookies, including who serves these cookies and how you can refuse them. Websites are increasingly giving browsers greater control through their "cookie banners". You may not be able to refuse the "essential cookies" mentioned earlier but you can block and delete these cookies by updating the settings in your browser.
- 2. Update your web browser settings:** You can set or amend your web browser controls to accept or refuse cookies. For example, if you use Internet Explorer click on: Settings > Internet options > Privacy > Advanced > Select "Block" for First Party Cookies, Third Party Cookies and Session Cookies. Similar options will be available for other browsers through the settings tool.
- 3. Update ad personalisation settings on social media and other apps and devices**
 - On social media ads, there is usually an icon you can click on to indicate that a certain advert is not relevant to you or that you no longer wish to see it. For example, on Instagram click "." in the top right hand corner of the advert and "Hide this". On Facebook, you can select not to receive adverts relating to certain topics, including parenting.
 - Review your ad settings on social media and turn off personalisation. You may also be able to control the aspects of your social media page which influence the adverts you receive and how your social media accounts interact to show you advertising. More information on turning off ad personalisation on iOS and Android devices can be found here: [Apple](#) and [Google](#).
 - Most advertising networks offer you a way to opt out of targeted advertising. If you would like to find out more information, please visit <http://www.aboutads.info/choices/> or <http://www.youronlinechoices.com>.

Jo Nevin and Megan Ward work in the Privacy, Security and Information team at international law firm, Fieldfisher