

Evaluating Health Information on the Internet

Many people now use the internet to get information about a particular illness or health-related treatment.

The problem is, many internet sites have information that is misleading, incorrect, or even dangerous if the advice they offer is followed.

This is because almost anybody can set up a web site and claim to offer expert information and opinions about any kind of medical or health treatment or condition.

Some sites are maintained by people who are promoting their own particular point of view about a particular illness or treatment, regardless of accepted, proven medical research and science, or their own education or training. Other sites are run by companies who want to sell you their product, whether it works “as advertised” or not.

This Health File is intended to give you some basic information about how you can evaluate health-related information you may find on the internet, and whether the information is accurate and without bias.

We have also listed a number of reliable, unbiased web sites that offer more detailed information about evaluating health information on the internet.

Most people agree that there are a few basic things you should look at when you want to tell whether the information on a particular web site is useful.

Basically, you want to make sure the information you are getting is:

- Accurate

- Objective
- Current, and
- Comprehensive

How accurate is the information?

Some things that can indicate an accurate source of information include:

- Statements backed up by references from reliable sources (like recognized medical journals, or authors with proven and verifiable academic credentials).

Most web site addresses start with **www.name.X** where “name” is the name of the organization sponsoring the site, and “X” is the kind of organization that supports the site. If the “X” part of the address is **edu**, **gov**, or **org**, (e.g. the Ministry of Health website www.gov.bc.ca/health) that means that the site is maintained by an **educational** institution, a **government** agency, or a non-profit **organization** respectively. Web site addresses that end in “.com” indicate commercial, or “for-profit” web sites. Although there are exceptions, profit-orientated web sites are more likely to be biased or otherwise interested in selling you on a particular idea or product.

- The site should not have spelling or typographic mistakes, or incorrect grammar.
- The site should not refer to “experts” without identifying them **and** their credentials.
- The main purpose of the site should be to provide information, not to entertain the reader.

How much can you trust the information?

- Again, check the address. If it has “.com” in it, it is more likely to be interested in promoting a particular product or point of view.
- Personal testimonials, while often convincing, are often if not usually written by persons without particular expertise or training in the subject they write about.
- Remember, even when lay people quote legitimate medical research sources to support their claims, most people do not have the training or clinical experience to properly evaluate the significance of these data.
- Links from the site to other web sites can also give you important clues about the objectivity or motive of the web site. Are the links connected to legitimate organizations or sources?
- A responsible site should also have some kind of feedback mechanism, to allow readers to offer comments on the contents of the site.

How current is the information?

It is hard to know how good information is if you do not know how recent it is.

- A properly maintained web site should be updated on a regular basis. The site should show clearly the last time it was updated.
- As well, links from the web site should also be updated, and outdated or dead links removed.

How comprehensive is the information?

A good web site should be well designed and easy to use. It should be easy for you to find your way to the information you want. It should have a good search engine to help you navigate the site.

Some good web sites on this topic:

<http://lib.nmsu.edu/instruction/evalcrit.html>

The Good, The Bad & The Ugly: or, Why It's a Good Idea to Evaluate Web Sources, by Susan E. Beck, Head, Humanities & Social Sciences

Services Department, New Mexico State University Library.

<http://health.gov/scipich/pubs/finalreport.htm>

Wired for Health and Well-Being: the Emergence of Interactive Health Communication. Science Panel on Interactive Communication and Health. Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services, US Government Printing Office, April 1999.

www.sph.emory.edu/wellness/abstract.html

Office of Health Promotion, Rollins School of Public Health, Emory University, -- an instrument to critique the credibility of health-related web sites.

www.caphis.mlanet.org/consumer/index.html

The consumer and patient health information section of the Medical Library Association's *Web Sites You Can Trust*:

www.ihealthcoalition.org/content/tips.html

Internet Healthcare Coalition's *Tips for Health Consumers: finding quality health information on the Internet*.

BC HealthGuideOnLine

Trusted information on more than 3,000 common health topics, tests, procedures and other resources. This secure health database contains medically approved information from the Healthwise® Knowledgebase. Visit the [BC HealthGuideOnLine](http://www.bchealthguide.org) Web site at: www.bchealthguide.org