

Health

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Double check health info from the Web

Many people are going to the Web for their medical information, which can be very dangerous because there is no government agency or other authority that screens and controls the information posted to the internet.

If you use medical information from the internet, you need to learn how to evaluate its quality because accuracy can vary a great deal. The number of Web sites offering health-related resources grows every day and there are some sites that do provide valuable information, and others that are unreliable and misleading. Here is a short guide to help you determine the accuracy and safety of medical information on the Web. As an example of an excellent site, visit www.eatright.org from the American Dietetic Association.

First, remember these points:

- Never follow advice without first consulting a health professional such as your doctor, pharmacist or nurse.
- Be especially cautious of the information you find if you have conditions that are difficult to treat or can have a terminal outcome, If a treatment sounds too good to be true, it probably is.
- Start your information search at a safe place. Rely on large, peer reviewed directories of health resources. An example of two directories are: <http://familydoctor.org>, from the American Academy of Family Physicians, and <http://medlineplus.gov/> from the U.S. National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health.
- Read reviews of sites to determine their value and the accuracy of information.

Then, when you find a Web site, ask these questions:

1. Who runs this site? Any good health related Web site should make it easy for you to find out who is responsible for the site and its information.
2. Who pays for the site? The source of a Web site's funding should be clearly stated or apparent. Web addresses ending in “gov” indicate that the Federal Government sponsors the site. Ask whether the site sells advertising? Is it sponsored by a drug company? The

source of the funding affects what is presented and how, and what the site owners want to accomplish on the site.

3. What is the purpose of the site? The purpose of the site should be clearly stated and is related to who runs and pays for the site. If you see an “About this Site” link, use it.

4. Where does the information come from? Many Web sites post information that is collected from other Web sites or sources. If the Web site you are on did not create the information, it should clearly state the original source.

5. What is the basis of the information? Information that is based on research should be identified with references for medical facts and figures; opinions/advice needs to be clearly labeled.

6. How current is the information? Has the information been reviewed recently to make sure it is still valid? Some information does not change, but the site should be reviewed and dated.

7. What information about you does the site collect and why? Web sites often ask for you to subscribe or become a member so they can collect a fee or information. Make sure you read and understand any privacy policy; don't sign up for anything you don't understand; make sure you know why they want the information and what they will do with it.