Evaluating health information on the internet – what should you look for?

Consider the source – use recognized authorities

Know who is responsible for the content.

- Look for an "about us" page. Check to see who runs the site: is it a branch of the Federal Government, a non-profit institution, a professional organization, a health system, a commercial organization or an individual.
- There is a big difference between a site that says, "I developed this site after my heart attack" and one that says, "This page on heart attack was developed by health professionals at the American Heart Association." Know the difference.
- Web sites should have a way to contact the organization or webmaster. If the site provides no contact information, or if you can't easily find out who runs the site, use caution.

Focus on quality – all web sites are not created equal

Does the site have an editorial board? Is the information reviewed before it is posted?

- This information is often on the "about us" page, or it may be under the organization's mission statement, or part of the annual report.
- See if the board members are experts in the subject of the site. For example, a site on osteoporosis whose medical advisory board is composed of attorneys and accountants is not medically authoritative.
- Look for a description of the process of selecting or approving information on the site. It is usually in the "about us" section and may be called "editorial policy" or "selection policy" or "review policy."
- Sometimes the site will have information "about our writers" or "about our authors" instead of an editorial policy. Review this section to find out who has written the information.

Be a cyberskeptic – quackery abounds on the web

Does the site make health claims that seem too good to be true? Does the information use deliberately obscure, "scientific" sounding language? Does it promise quick, dramatic, miraculous results? Is this the only site making these claims?

- Beware of claims that one remedy will cure a variety of illnesses, that it is a "breakthrough," or that it relies on a "secret ingredient."
- Use caution if the site uses a sensational writing style (lots of exclamation points, for example.)
- A health web site for consumers should use simple language, not technical jargon.
- Get a second opinion! Check more than one site.

Look for the evidence – rely on medical research, not opinion

Does the site identify the author? Does it rely on testimonials?

- Look for the author of the information, either an individual or an organization. Good examples are "Written by Jane Smith, R.N.," or "Copyright 2012, American Cancer Society."
- If there are case histories or testimonials on the web site, look for contact information such as an email address or telephone number. If the testimonials are anonymous or hard to track down ("Jane from California"), use caution.

Check for currency – look for the latest information

Is the information current?
- Look for dates on documents. A document on coping with the loss of a loved one doesn’t need to be current, but a document on the latest treatment of AIDS needs to be current.
- Click on a few links on the site. If there are a lot of broken links, the site may not be kept up-to-date.

Beware of bias – what is the purpose? Who is providing the funding?

Who pays for the site?
- Check to see if the site is supported by public funds, donations or by commercial advertising.
- Advertisements should be labeled. They should say "Advertisement" or "From our Sponsor."
- Look at a page on the site, and see if it is clear when content is coming from a non-commercial source and when an advertiser provides it. For example, if a page about treatment of depression recommends one drug by name, see if you can tell if the company that manufactures the drug provides that information. If it does, you should consult other sources to see what they say about the same drug.

Protect your privacy – health information should be confidential

- Does the site have a privacy policy and tell you what information they collect?
- There should be a link saying "Privacy" or "Privacy Policy." Read the privacy policy to see if your privacy is really being protected. For example, if the site says "We share information with companies that can provide you with useful products," then your information isn’t private.
- If there is a registration form, notice what types of questions you must answer before you can view content. If you must provide personal information (such as name, address, date of birth, gender, mother’s maiden name, credit card number) you should refer to their privacy policy to see what they can do with your information.

Consult with your health professional

Patient/provider partnerships lead to the best medical decisions.

For further information on evaluating health websites:
- Visit the MedlinePlus, Evaluating Health Information and Evaluating Internet Health Information: A Tutorial from the National Library of Medicine.
The Medical Library Association’s top picks (in alphabetical order)

1. **Cancer.gov** (http://www.cancer.gov) is the official website for The National Cancer Institute (NCI), a component of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), one of eight agencies that compose the Public Health Service (PHS) in the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). The NCI, established under the National Cancer Act of 1937, is the Federal Government's principal agency for cancer research and training. NCI coordinates the National Cancer Program, which conducts and supports research, training, health information dissemination, and other programs with respect to the cause, diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of cancer, rehabilitation from cancer, and the continuing care of cancer patients and the families of cancer patients.

2. **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** (http://www.cdc.gov), an agency of the Department of Health and Human Services, is dedicated to promoting "health and quality of life by preventing and controlling disease, injury, and disability." Of special interest to the consumer are the resources about diseases, conditions, and other special topics arranged under "Health Topics A-Z," and "Travelers' Health," with health recommendations for travelers worldwide. There are also sections on health topics in the news and health hoaxes. Information is also available in Spanish.

3. **Familydoctor.org** (http://familydoctor.org) is operated by the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP), a national medical organization representing more than 93,700 family physicians, family practice residents and medical students. All of the information on this site has been written and reviewed by physicians and patient education professionals at the AAFP.

4. **Healthfinder®** (http://www.healthfinder.gov) is a gateway consumer health information website whose goal is "to improve consumer access to selected health information from government agencies, their many partner organizations, and other reliable sources that serve the public interest." Menu lists on its home page provide links to online journals, medical dictionaries, minority health, and prevention and self-care. The developer and sponsor of this site is the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Department of Health and Human Services, with other agencies that also can be linked to via the site. Access to resources on the site is also available in Spanish.

5. **HIV InSite** (http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu) is a project of the University of California San Francisco (UCSF) AIDS Research Institute. Designed as a gateway to in-depth information about particular aspects of HIV/AIDS, it provides numerous links to many authoritative sources. Subjects are arranged into "Key Topics" and the site may also be searched by key words. Many items are provided in full text, and information is available in English and Spanish.
6. **Kidshealth** (http://www.kidshealth.org) provides doctor-approved health information about children from before birth through adolescence. Created by The Nemours Foundation's Center for Children's Health Media, KidsHealth provides families with accurate, up-to-date, and jargon-free health information they can use.

7. **MayoClinic** (http://www.mayoclinic.com) is an extension of the Mayo Clinic's commitment to provide health education to patients and the general public. Editors of the site include more than 2,000 physicians, scientists, writers, and educators at the Mayo Clinic, a nonprofit institution with more than 100 years of history in patient care, medical research, and education. The website has added interactive tools to assist consumers in managing their health. This site supersedes the previous site, Mayo Clinic Health Oasis.


9. **NOAH: New York Online Access to Health** (http://www.noah-health.org) is a unique collection of state, local, and federal health resources for consumers. NOAH's mission is "to provide high-quality, full-text information for consumers that is accurate, timely, relevant, and unbiased." Information is arranged in alphabetical "Health Topics" which are then narrowed to include definitions, care and treatment, and lists of information resources. Information is available in both English and Spanish, and the majority of items are provided in full text.

This document was adapted from: