Gaylord Specialty Healthcare
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How to Evaluate Internet Medical/Health Resources

The Internet is a rich resource for health information with millions of searches done by health consumers and professionals. Often valuable information is obtained but sometimes dangerous and misleading information is found. How can the consumer tell the difference? Use the following questions to help you evaluate various web resources.

Who is responsible for the website? (The site's URL can give you an idea.)

- .com: Many websites are commercials for particular goods and/or services. The information is provided to sell a product -- although there may be credible information. You can identify commercial websites by the URL (web address), which usually ends in .com.

- .edu: Educational websites are intended to provide information about an institution and to provide information that is factual and well researched. Educational website URLs end in .edu.

- .org: Organizational websites are often the work of not-for-profit institutions and may contain valuable information. Scientific and research groups produce websites that can be identified by .org in the URL.

- .gov: Sites that are U.S. government sponsored and have excellent and reliable information have .gov in the URL. This includes sites such as the Centers for Disease Control, National Institutes of Health, and National Cancer Institute, etc.

- Personal websites, social networking sites and blogs often turn up in a search of the Internet. These sites should be used with a great caution because the material presented is generally biased and non-scientific.

What is the purpose of the website?

- The purpose of the website should be clearly stated. Look for an "About this Site" tab or link on the website's homepage. There should be a clear statement of purpose, such as "*MedlinePlus is the National Institutes of Health's Web site for patients and their families and friends. Produced by the National Library of Medicine, it brings you information about diseases, conditions, and wellness issues in language you can understand. MedlinePlus offers reliable, up-to-date health information, anytime, anywhere, for free.*"

- Be sure the website clearly states whether the information is for the consumer or for the professional. Many health-related websites have separate areas for different users; be sure it is clear which area is appropriate for your needs.

Is the information reliable?

- A reliable website will provide sources of information and indicate who is responsible for the information. This is important because you will want to verify the information. If an author is given, try to evaluate if he or she is qualified and has the credentials and/or the affiliation to support the material.

Is the information current?

- Check for dates on the website to ensure that the information is up to date. Look for dates when the material was updated.

- Dead links are a warning sign that the website is not being maintained and updated.

Is the information clear?

- Clarity is an important element of a credible website. The information must be clearly presented and must be formatted for legibility and easy reading. Watch for mistakes in spelling and word usage.

- Graphics are also important. Consider whether the graphics on a website add to the content or distract from it.

- Advertisements are becoming a way of life on the Internet, but they should not interfere with your ability to use the website.

- Hoaxes are a major problem because anyone can publish to the Internet. When in doubt, always verify the information you uncover by searching other websites.

Here are a few reliable medical websites to get you started:

Medlineplus (www.medlineplus.gov)
This site is authoritative and current, offering links to medical information that has been evaluated by the National Library of Medicine. This is a good source for drug information, the latest health news, and interactive tutorials. The site is also available in Spanish. This is the first website a health consumer should visit.

Healthfinder (www.healthfinder.gov)
Developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, this site links to carefully evaluated health-related organization websites. Much of the information is also available in Spanish.

The Cleveland Clinic Health Information Center
(www.clevelandclinic.org/health/default.asp)
There are over 900 health topics available on this website, along with podcasts, webcasts, and live chat.