Evaluating Online Health Information

by Molly Moore, NLLIC Librarian

I’m admitting to you all now – I tend to run to the Web for information about my health before I see my doctor. In the age of the Internet, it’s just easy to do. But would I advise you to do this? Only with caution and not without arming you with practical information to weed out the bad health sites from the good. Kelly Williams, MPH, CHES, and ACA health educator, has this advice: “Looking at reputable health sites for initial information is fine, but know where you’re looking and know when to call your healthcare provider.”

My doctor often urges me to look up information online about a specific problem or condition after I’ve been in the office. This is good advice, but knowing where to look is the key. Simply Googling a health topic might lead you to a credible source or it might not.

You might find yourself surfing onto just anyone’s personal online journal entry or the pages of an unlicensed “healthcare professional.” Without a critical eye, you will not know if the source is credible or if the information is accurate or biased. Never fear! You don’t have to be an Internet search expert to navigate the galaxy of health Web sites out there. Here is a short guide for evaluating health information online.

Know where to start.

To understand what you’re looking at, you must first understand the different kinds of sites out there. They come in many different forms and have different purposes. For example, organizations such as the Amputee Coalition of America and the American Diabetes Association offer a wealth of information about a particular health concern. Other organizations, like the American Academy of Family Physicians, aim to give practical medical and health information on a variety of topics that concern adults and children. Through Medline Plus, U.S. government agencies offer extensive information on diseases, health conditions and drugs for both healthcare practitioners and the public. Information can range from specific to general and from highly technical to general interest; the content presented will depend on the author and purpose of the site.

Tip: Reputable health Web sites will have contact information, complete with a physical address and phone number. Contact information should be easy to locate.

Who is the author or sponsor?

Look at the “About” section of the Web site to learn who is responsible for the content of the site. Here you should find if the site is sponsored by a larger organization or if it is the work of one person. If an organization, does it include information about its mission, board and funding? If one person or a few people have created it, be wary. Check their credentials and seek supporting information from established health organizations. Always ask, “What gives them the authority to provide this information?”

Also, look at the Web address (called the URL). Does the domain name (basic root of the URL, such as “http://www.amputee-coalition.org”) make sense for the site’s material or theme? Web sites that have a domain name closely matching the sponsor or topic of the site are more likely to be reputable. Looking at the URL can also tip you off that the content is someone’s personal journal, or that the site was created through a company that offers free Web site hosting (e.g., Geocities.com).

Tip: Established health information sites will have their own domain. It is something that organizations are willing to invest in. (This doesn’t automatically mean a site is reputable, but it is one indication.) The page you’re looking at may be part of a site by a larger organization, like a university or hospital. If so, the department or faculty member within the organization responsible for the content should be easily identifiable.

What is the goal of the author?

Most health Web sites have a goal of educating and supporting the consumer. Their main goal should be to provide you – the consumer – with quality health information. Ask yourself if they are selling something. If so, be a super-skeptic. Commercial companies can provide good information, but don’t assume the information is always unbiased. It is more likely that you can get unbiased information from a noncommercial site.

Tip: Look for .org (nonprofit organization) and .gov (federal government) in the URL. For .com (commercial) addresses, make certain you understand the sponsors and their purpose. When looking at an .edu
(education) site, make sure it is from a higher education institute that focuses on health or medicine.

**Evaluate the content.**
Not all information is created equal. Reliable health information Web sites will include:
- Recent updates to the Web site
- Information or articles with dates, authors, and sources
- Information written by licensed health professionals
- Links to information from other reputable information sources.
  (Be suspicious of any Web site that only refers to its own information.)

**Tip:** Look for evidence, not opinion. Unbiased health information will rely on collective medical wisdom and evidence.

**Put the pieces together.**
Together, all of these factors will determine the reliability of health information from any particular Web site. If you aren’t convinced that you’re getting the best information available, move to another source. Some Web sites will be stronger in one area than another. So use a variety of online sources to fill your health information needs.

**Tip:** Use your Internet browser to bookmark a few trustworthy health Web sites for future reference. Start your search for information there.

**The librarian’s picks for quality online health information:**
www.FamilyDoctor.org  
www.HealthFinder.gov  
www.MayoClinic.com  
www.WebMD.com

**Further Reading:**
www.mlanet.org/resources/userguide.html

**WARNING: Quackery Thrives Online**
Snake-oil salesmen of the past have turned to slick, multimedia Web sites, digital imaging software and e-mail SPAM to con great numbers of Americans. Don’t be fooled. Here are some questions to ask yourself:
- Does the product or treatment sound too good to be true?
- Do they promise quick, easy, miraculous results?
- Do they rely on testimonies instead of published research?
- Is the writing sensational, with many exclamation points?
- Does the product promise to cure multiple illnesses?
If the answer is “Yes” to any of these, think again. Critically analyze the Web site, and check with the U. S. Food and Drug Administration, the Better Business Bureau and your doctor before purchasing.