Evaluating Health Information Online

Problem:

Content on the Internet is unregulated, and therefore, anyone can publish anything on the Internet. There is sound medical information on the Internet and dangerous information. You need to be able to tell the difference! As a general rule of thumb, when you're looking for health information, stick with educational institutions, government sources, and health-related associations or societies.

Ask yourself the following:

- Why did the person create the page?
- What’s in it for them?
- Are they trying to sell me something?

Criteria for evaluating information from the web:

**Accuracy**

- Is the information based on sound medical research? Can the information on the web page be verified by another source?
- Are the sources cited reliable?
- Are there grammatical and spelling errors?
- Are there footnotes, bibliographies, or references so that you can verify the information? Are these reliable? Is it from a popular magazine or a medical journal?

**Examples:**

Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus: [https://zapatopi.net/treeoctopus/](https://zapatopi.net/treeoctopus/)


**Authority**

- Who published the page? What are the person’s credentials? What do you know about them?
• Is the person backed by a known organization? (The American Association for Cancer Therapy may be a made-up name for something operating out of someone’s basement.)

• Is the person affiliated with a university? If so, is the person a student or a faculty member?

• Can you easily find contact information on the web page? Check the “about us” link, usually found at the beginning or the end of a webpage

• What is the domain name? (.edu, .gov) Is it a personal page or supported by the organization?

Examples:

Patient.info Tourette’s Syndrome: https://patient.info/health/tourettes-syndrome-leaflet

Bias/Objectivity

• Is the information showing just one point of view?

• What kind of institution sponsored the webpage? A pharmaceutical company? A non-profit organization?

• Is advertising clearly marked?

• Can you tell if the information you are reading is advertising?

• Do the graphics, fonts, and verbiage play to the emotions? Beware of CAPITAL LETTERS, EXCLAMATION POINTS!!!!! Or words like “MIRACLE CURE!!!”

• Is the author using data improperly to promote a position or a product?

Examples:

DHMO - The Truth: http://www.dhmo.org

Currency/Timeliness
• Is there a date on the page?

• When was the page last updated?

• Do the links work?

• Has there been more recent research on the subject? Many medical treatments change with the publication of new studies. What was published a year ago may be outdated now.

Example:

WebMD: Hormone Replacement Therapy Q & A
https://www.webmd.com/women/guide/hormone-replacement-q-a#1

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**Coverage**

• Is the information complete?

• Are there sources given for additional information?

Example:

The Anti-Aging Medicine Clinic: Altitude Sickness:
http://www.medical-library.net/altitude-sickness/

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**Additional Resources:**

Quackwatch
https://www.quackwatch.org

Snopes
https://www.snopes.com

MedlinePlus
https://www.medlineplus.gov (health topics: health fraud, evaluating health information)

Evaluating Internet Health Information: A Tutorial from the National Library of Medicine: https://medlineplus.gov/webeval/webeval.html