

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/>

Dog Island: <http://www.thedogisland.com/>

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 advertisement?
- 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>

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/>

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>