10 Things To Know About Evaluating Medical Resources on the Web

The number of Web sites offering health-related resources grows every day. Many sites provide valuable information, while others may have information that is unreliable or misleading. This short guide contains important questions you should consider as you look for health information online. Answering these questions when you visit a new site will help you evaluate the information you find.

1. Who runs this site?

Any good health-related Web site should make it easy for you to learn who is responsible for the site and its information. On this site, for example, the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) is clearly marked on every major page of the site, along with a link to the NCCAM homepage.

2. Who pays for the site?

It costs money to run a Web site. The source of a Web site's funding should be clearly stated or readily apparent. For example, Web addresses ending in ".gov" denote a Federal Government-sponsored site. You should know how the site pays for its existence. Does it sell advertising? Is it sponsored by a drug company? The source of funding can affect what content is presented, how the content is presented, and what the site owners want to accomplish on the site.

3. What is the purpose of the site?

This question is related to who runs and pays for the site. An "About This Site" link appears on many sites; if it's there, use it. The purpose of the site should be clearly stated and should help you evaluate the trustworthiness of the information.

4. Where does the information come from?

Many health/medical sites post information collected from other Web sites or sources. If the person or organization in charge of the site did not create the information, the original source should be clearly labeled.

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5.   What is the basis of the information?

In addition to identifying who wrote the material you are reading, the site should describe the evidence that the material is based on. Medical facts and figures should have references (such as to articles in medical journals). Also, opinions or advice should be clearly set apart from information that is "evidence-based" (that is, based on research results).

6.   How is the information selected?

Is there an editorial board? Do people with excellent professional and scientific qualifications review the material before it is posted?

7.   How current is the information?

Web sites should be reviewed and updated on a regular basis. It is particularly important that medical information be current. The most recent update or review date should be clearly posted. Even if the information has not changed, you want to know whether the site owners have reviewed it recently to ensure that it is still valid.

8.   How does the site choose links to other sites?

Web sites usually have a policy about how they establish links to other sites. Some medical sites take a conservative approach and don't link to any other sites. Some link to any site that asks, or pays, for a link. Others only link to sites that have met certain criteria.

9.   What information about you does the site collect, and why?

Web sites routinely track the paths visitors take through their sites to determine what pages are being used. However, many health Web sites ask for you to "subscribe" or "become a member." In some cases, this may be so that they can collect a user fee or select information for you that is relevant to your concerns. In all cases, this will give the site personal information about you.

Any credible health site asking for this kind of information should tell you exactly what they will and will not do with it. Many commercial sites sell "aggregate" (collected) data about their users to other companies—information such as what percentage of their users are women with breast cancer, for example. In some cases they may collect and reuse information that is "personally identifiable," such as your ZIP code, gender, and birth date. Be certain that you read and understand any privacy policy or similar language on the site, and don't sign up for anything that you are not sure you fully understand.

10.   How does the site manage interactions with visitors?

There should always be a way for you to contact the site owner if you run across problems or have questions or feedback. If the site hosts chat rooms or other online discussion areas, it should tell

visitors what the terms of using this service are. Is it moderated? If so, by whom, and why? It is always a good idea to spend time reading the discussion without joining in, so that you feel comfortable with the environment before becoming a participant.

For More Information

NCCAM Clearinghouse

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