Introduction

Welcome to the Evaluating Internet Health Information tutorial from the National Library of Medicine.

This tutorial will teach you how to evaluate health information found on the internet.

Using the internet to find health information is like going on a treasure hunt. You could find some real gems, but you could also end up in some strange and dangerous places!

So how can you tell if a Web site is reliable? There are a few quick steps you can take to check out a Web site. Let's consider the clues to look for when checking out Web sites.

- Who runs the site?
- Why have they created the site?
- What do they want from you?
- Who is paying for the site? Does the site's information favor the sponsor?
- Is the information reviewed by experts?
- Where did the information come from?
- Does the site make unbelievable claims?
- Is it up-to-date?
- Do "they" want your personal information? What will "they" do with it
Introduction

Answering each of these questions gives you clues about the quality of the information on the site. You can usually find the answers on the main page or the "About Us" page of a Web site. Site maps can also be helpful.

Let's say your doctor just told you that you have high cholesterol. You want to learn more about it before your next doctor's appointment, and you have started with the Internet.

Let's say that you found these two Web sites. (They are not real sites). Anyone can put up a Web page. You want a trusted source. First, find out who is running the site.

These two examples of websites demonstrate how pages can potentially be arranged.
Evaluating Internet Health Information: Provider and Purpose—Part 1 of 6

In our first example site, the website name is the Physicians Academy for Better Health. But you can't go by the name alone. You need more information about who created the site and why.

Look for the 'About' or 'About Us' link. This should be your first stop in the search for clues. It should say who is running the Web site, and why.

Potentially there can be a link either toward the bottom or even toward the upper area of the page where other site related information is located as shown in this example.
Evaluating Internet Health Information:  
Provider and Purpose—Part 1 of 6

From our example for the Physicians Academy for Better Health website, we learn from their ‘About Us’ page that the organization's mission is to ‘educate the public on disease prevention and healthy living.’

This example shows a mission statement on the About Us page.
Evaluating Internet Health Information:
Provider and Purpose—Part 2 of 6

From our example for the Physicians Academy for Better Health website, we learn this site is run by health care professionals and their area of expertise, including those who specialize in heart health. This is important when you want to receive information from experts on heart-related subjects.

As shown in this example, information on staff or information sources allow you to evaluate quality of the site's information.
Next, check to see if there is a way to contact the organization running the site. This site provides an e-mail address, a mailing address, and a phone number.

In this example, the contact information is located in the footer area of the website. Other sites may have a dedicated contact us web page with their contact information or even a request form.
Evaluating Internet Health Information: Provider and Purpose—Part 3 of 6

Now let's go to the other site and look for the same clues.

The Institute for a Healthier Heart runs this Web site.

Here is an "About this Site" link.

This example shows that not every site locates or names their About page exactly the same.
Evaluating Internet Health Information: Provider and Purpose—Part 3 of 6

This page says that the Institute consists of "individuals and businesses concerned with heart health."

Who are these individuals? Who are these businesses? It does not say. Sometimes missing pieces of information can be important clues!

This example shows that this site's sources are not specified.
Evaluating Internet Health Information: Provider and Purpose—Part 4 of 6

The Institute's mission is "to provide the public with heart health information and to offer related services."

Are these services free? The unspoken purpose might be to sell you something.

If you keep reading, you'll find it says that a company that makes vitamins and medications helps to sponsor the site.

The site might favor that particular company and its products.

This example shows that it is helpful to read the information about the site.
What about contact information? There is a 'Contact Us' link, but no other contact information is provided.

This example shows that contact information may be harder to find and not as clearly provided as other sites.
Evaluating Internet Health Information: Provider and Purpose—Part 5 of 6

On the example website for the Institute for a Healthier Heart, there is a link to an online shop that allows visitors to purchase products.

A site's main purpose may be to sell you something and not just to offer information.

But the site may not explain this directly. You need to investigate!

This example shows that a site with a shopping cart as a main item on the site may have a higher priority to sell you something.
Evaluating Internet Health Information: Provider and Purpose—Part 5 of 6

The online store includes items from the drug company that funds the site. Keep this in mind as you browse the site.

The clue suggests that the site might have a preference for the drug company or its products.

Example of a site with a shopping cart and the type of health-related products potentially offered.
Check to see if there are advertisements on the sites. If so, can you tell the ads from the health information?

Both of these sites have advertisements.

On the Physicians Academy page, the ad is clearly labeled as an advertisement.

You can easily tell it apart from the content on the page.

This example shows what an advertisement may look like, particularly when they are labeled as advertisement.
Evaluating Internet Health Information: Provider and Purpose—Part 6 of 6

On the other site, this advertisement is not identified as an ad.

It is hard to tell the difference between the ad and the content. This may be done to encourage you to buy something.

In this example where the ad is not identified, you need to decide if they are promoting a product instead of actual health information.
You now have some clues about who is publishing each site and why. But how can you tell if the information is high-quality? Look at where the information comes from or who writes it.

Phrases like "editorial board," "selection policy," or "review process" can point you in the right direction. Let's see if these clues are provided on each Web site.

Let's go back to the "About Us" page of the Physicians Academy for Better Health Web site. The Board of Directors reviews all medical information before it is posted on the Web site. We learned earlier that they are trained medical professionals, usually M.D.s. They only approve information that meets their rules for quality.

This example demonstrates a clearly stated policy for the quality of their information and priorities.
Evaluating Internet Health Information: Information Quality—Part 1 of 4

Let's see what information we can find on our other example website for the Institute for a Healthier Heart.

You know that a "group of individuals and businesses" is running this site. But you don't know who these individuals are, or if they are medical experts.

This example demonstrates how unclear a website's sources can be and how unclear the quality of their information can be.
Evaluating Internet Health Information: Information Quality—Part 2 of 4

You learned from earlier clues that a drug company sponsors the site. It is possible that this group writes information for the Web site in order to promote the company and its products.

Even if experts review the information that is posted on a site, you should continue to ask questions. Look for hints about where the information came from. Good sites should rely on medical research, not opinion.

It should be clear who wrote the content. Check to see if the original sources of the data and research are listed.

This example says the site is getting support from a drug company demonstrating why reviewing the site information is important.
Evaluating Internet Health Information: Information Quality—Part 3 of 4

This site provides some background data and identifies the source. Information written by others is clearly labeled.

The Physicians Academy for Better Health site demonstrates how a source is noted for your reference and even provide a link to the source.
On the other Web site, we see a page that mentions a research study. Yet there are no details about who conducted the study, or when it was done. You have no way of verifying their information.

The Institute for a Healthier Heart site makes only a vague reference to a 'recent research study'.
Evaluating Internet Health Information: Information Quality—Part 4 of 4

Here are some other hints: Look at the general tone of the information. Is it too emotional? Does it sound too good to be true? Be cautious about sites that make unbelievable claims or promote "miracle cures." Neither of these sites present information this way.

Next, check to see if the information is current. Out-of-date information can be hazardous to your health. It may not reflect the latest research or treatments. Look for some sign that the site is reviewed and updated regularly. Here is an important clue. The information on this site was reviewed recently.

The example on the Physicians Academy for Better Health site states the date of the review.
Evaluating Internet Health Information: Information Quality—Part 4 of 4

There are no dates on this site's pages. You do not know if the information is current.

The example on the Institute for a Healthier Heart site does not state the date of the information, only the date the organization itself was formed.
Evaluating Internet Health Information: Privacy—Part 1 of 3

Maintaining your privacy is another important thing to remember. Some sites ask for you to "sign up" or "become a member." Before you do, look for a privacy policy to see how the site will use your personal information.

On this example website for Physicians Academy for Better Health there is a link to their Privacy Policy on every page.

The example on the Physicians Academy for Better Health site clearly provides a link to their privacy policy in the footer area of their site.
Evaluating Internet Health Information:
Privacy—Part 1 of 3

On this site, users can sign up for an e-mail newsletter. This requires that you share your name and e-mail address.

The Privacy Policy explains how this information will be used. It will not be shared with outside organizations.

Only sign up for the newsletter if you are comfortable with how your information will be used.

This example they indicate that it is your choice to provide your personal information along with stating what they will not do with your information.
Evaluating Internet Health Information:
Privacy—Part 2 of 3

On the other example website for the Institute for a Healthier Heart, there is also a Privacy Policy available.

In this example, they make the link to their Privacy Policy clearly visible.
Evaluating Internet Health Information: Privacy—Part 2 of 3

The Institute collects information about everyone who visits their Web site. In this example, they indicate that they are passively collecting information on your visit, though initially it is not personally identifiable to you specifically.
Evaluating Internet Health Information: Privacy—Part 3 of 3

This site promotes a "membership" option. You can sign up to join the Institute and receive special offers.

And as you saw earlier, a store on this site allows you to buy products.

If you do either of these, you will be giving the Institute your personal information.

This example shows that your name, zip code and age are being requested. This type of information is personally identifiable to you.
Evaluating Internet Health Information: Privacy—Part 3 of 3

From the Privacy Policy, you learn that your information will be shared with the company that sponsors the site. It may also be shared with others.

Only share your information if you are comfortable with how it will be used.

This example shows why reading the privacy policy is beneficial to you in determining the site's priorities.
Evaluating Internet Health Information:
Conclusion—Part 1 of 2

The Internet provides you with immediate access to health information. But you need to distinguish the good sites from the bad. Let’s review the clues to quality by looking at our two fictional Web sites. The site for the Physicians Academy for Better Health:

- is run by experts
- has a clearly stated purpose
- labels advertising
- reviews information before posting it
- explains the sources of data and research
- is up-to-date and will not share personal information

The example of the Physicians Academy for Better Health home page shows a clearly laid out and important items clearly labeled for you to find the important information you need to decide on the quality of the site.
Evaluating Internet Health Information: Conclusion—Part 1 of 2

The site for the Institute for a Healthier Heart:

- does not explain who is running it
- may favor its sponsor
- has an unclear purpose
- does not label advertising
- does not describe how information is added
- does not identify the sources of information
- does not tell how old the information is
- and might share your personal information with others

The example of the Institute for a Healthier Heart home page shows that while it appears to be a good site at first, when you start looking further the information you need to verify the quality of the information on the site is not available.
Evaluating Internet Health Information:
Conclusion—Part 2 of 2

We compared two example websites in this tutorial, and the Physicians Academy for Better Health Web site is more likely to be a reliable source of information.

While websites can look legitimate, taking the time to check things out about the site can help you decide if you can trust the information they provide.
Evaluating Internet Health Information:
Conclusion—Part 2 of 2

Be sure to look for these clues as you search online. Your health could depend on it.

We have made a checklist of questions to ask when browsing Web sites.

Each question will lead you to clues about the quality of the information on the site. You will usually find the answers on the home page and in an "About Us" area.

Asking these questions will help you find quality Web sites. But there is no guarantee that the information is perfect.

Review several high-quality Web sites to see if similar information appears in more than one place. Looking at many good sites will also give you a wider view of a health issue.

And remember that online information is not a substitute for medical advice — consult a health professional before taking any of the advice that you have found online.

If you are looking for information to follow up on what your doctor has told you, share what you find with your doctor at your next visit.

Patient/provider partnerships lead to the best medical decisions.

For more details on how to evaluate health Web sites, visit the MedlinePlus page on Evaluating Health Information.

This resource is provided to you by the National Library of Medicine. We invite you to link to this tutorial from your Web site.