

Guide To “Healthy” Web Surfing

Ways to Evaluate the Quality of Health Information on Web Sites

Be a cyberskeptic - Quackery is everywhere on the Web. Anyone can put up a Web page and make claims.

- Beware of claims that one remedy will cure a variety of illnesses, that it is a “breakthrough,” promises quick, dramatic results, or that it relies on a “secret ingredient.” Does it sound too good to be true?
- Use caution if the site uses a sensational writing style (lots of exclamation points, for example.)
- A health Web site for patients and families should use simple language, not technical words.
- Get a second opinion! Check more than one site. Is this the only site making these claims?

Consider the source - Look for recognized authorities and know who is responsible for the content.

- Look for an “about us” page. Who runs the site? Is it a branch of the federal government, a nonprofit institution, a professional organization, a health system, a commercial organization or an individual?
- Web sites should have a way to contact the group or Web master. Be careful if the page does not have any contact information, or if you cannot easily find out who runs the site.

Focus on the quality of the information - Who looks at the information before it is put on the Web page?

- Is there an editorial board? This information may be on the “about us” page, under the organization’s mission statement.
- Are the board members experts in the area? For example, a site on CF whose medical advisory board is made up of lawyers and accountants would not be a good source of medical information.
- How is information approved? Look for “editorial policy” or “selection policy” or “review policy.”
- Look for sections called “about our writers” or “about our authors” to find out about the writers.

Look for the evidence - Rely on medical research, not opinion or anonymous testimonials.

- Who wrote the information? Is the name of either an individual or an organization listed? Good examples are “Written by Jane Smith, R.N.,” or “Copyright 2003, Cystic Fibrosis Foundation.”
- If case histories or testimonials are on the Web site, look for contact information: an e-mail address or telephone number. If testimonials are unidentified or hard to find (“Jane from Iowa”), use caution.

Check the date - Look for the latest information – is the information on the site current?

- Look for dates on documents. An article on dealing with the loss of a loved one does not need to be current, but a document on the latest way to treat AIDS needs to be current.
- Click on a few links on the site. If there are a lot of broken links, the site may not be kept up-to-date.

Beware of bias - What is the purpose of the Web site? Who is paying for or funding the site?

- Check to see if the site is supported by public funds, donations or by commercial advertising.
- Advertisements should be labeled. They should say “Advertisement” or “From our Sponsor.”
- Look at the information on the page to see where it is coming from. For example, if the company that makes the medicine provides information about a way to treat depression using only a drug they make, you should consult other sources to see what they say about the same drug.

Protect your privacy - Health information should be confidential.

- There should be a link saying “Privacy” or “Privacy Policy.” Read this to see if your privacy is really being protected. For example, if the site says “We share information with companies that can provide you with useful products,” then your information is not private.

Talk to your CF Center Team - the best care decisions are those that are made together.

Resource: Medline Plus: www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/evaluatinghealthinformation.html