

Evaluating Online Medical Information

There is an abundance of medical information on the internet. How do you know what to trust? In this guide you will find guidelines for evaluating online medical information.

Look for recognized authorities.

- In general you can trust public institutions and learned societies, such as the National Institutes of Health (NIH) or the American Medical Association (AMA).
- Websites ending in .gov or .edu are more reliable and trustworthy than .org or .com. You can use .org or .com sites, just take extra time to fully evaluate the website.
- Look at the “About Us” page. This page should tell you more about the creator of the content. Are they a government organization, non-profit, professional association, commercial organization, or an individual? An individual should list their qualifications and credentials. Try to determine a commercial website’s motivation.
- Check outside sources. What do they say about the resource you are looking at? Is there a Wikipedia page that can give you more information?
- Look for contact information. There should be a way to contact the organization or people who run the site.

Look for quality.

- What process does the content go through before it is shared? Is there an editorial process? Is the information reviewed? The editorial process might be on the “About Us” page or another page that is easy to locate. The page might say something like “review policy” or “selection policy.”
- Are the people who run the site or writing the information experts in their field? Look for medical experts with proper qualifications such as M.D. Ph.D. or specialized degree. You might find this information in a section called “About our

board/advisors/writers/contributors.” Information should be transparent and easy to locate.

Be skeptical.

- Beware of “miracle cures,” dramatic breakthroughs, secret ingredients, and sensational claims. If something seems too good to be true it probably is.
- If you think what you are looking at might be valid, verify the information with other, reliable sources.

Look for evidence.

- Don’t trust sources that only offer opinions or testimonials.
- Look for citations, such as links to studies or a reference section. You should be able to tell the source of any original data or information.

Currency.

- How current is the information? Though science builds on past discoveries, you will want to find the most current up to date information.
- Look for dates on web pages such as when the information was published or last updated.
- Are there lots of broken links? If this is the case then the website may not be maintained or up to date.

Determine the purpose of the information.

- Is the site trying to sell you something or make a profit?
- Who is funding the site? Is the funding public, private, supplied by donations, or through advertising.
- Advertising should be clearly labeled with a possible statement about ads and funding.

- Be aware of who is providing the information. If a drug company is supplying the information about their product, confirm the information from a source not associated with the company.

Other tips.

- Don't provide personal information unless you fully understand what will be done with your information. Privacy policies should be clearly stated.
- Consult with a health professional if you are seeking advice or treatment about your own medical issue.
- Avoid getting information from social media unless the information is from a verified account of a trusted resource.