

April 2019 Health Notes by Evelyn Ames

Are You Savvy Choosing Web Sites for Health Information?

There is a plethora of health information available to consumers via magazines, TV, newspapers, and the Internet. Some information is reliable, up-to-date, and useful; some is not. As for the Internet, telling the good from the not so good requires web users to be astute. Clicking the first listed site in a search can be misleading and steer the user to commercial/fraudulent sites. Conducting a web search for information on particular health issues? Ask the following questions.

1. **Who** runs or created the site? Is it a branch of the government (e.g., National Institutes of Health), a university, a professional health organization (e.g., American Public Health Association, American College of Sports Medicine), a hospital or clinic (e.g., Mayo or Cleveland)? Or is it a business designed to entice viewers? Focus on quality. Does the site have an editorial board? Can you determine if the information is reviewed before it is posted? Be skeptical. Things that sound too good to be true often are.
2. **What** is the site promising or offering? Does the information use obscure, “scientific” sounding language or promise quick, miraculous results? Be aware of claims when a promoted remedy has a “secret” ingredient that will cure a variety of illnesses. Use caution if the writing style has lots of exclamation points. Web sites for health consumers should use simple language, not technical jargon.
3. **When** was its information written or reviewed? Is it up-to-date? This does depend on the subject matter. For example, the need for up-to-date information is important when searching treatments for influenza but it is not necessarily so when seeking information on coping with loss. Are there broken links when clicking on listed sites? This is a clue that the site may not be kept-up-to-date.
4. **Where** does the information come from? Is it based on scientific research? Search for second opinions to get clarification as to where it comes from.
5. **Why** does the site exist? Is it selling something? Who is paying for the site (public, government, non-profit health organization, a non-commercial or a commercial company)? Is the advertiser promoting a “special” product? The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has warned the public about fake online news sites. Sites may look real but are merely advertisements. Logos of legitimate news organizations or similar names and Web addresses may be used. You may be asked to sign up for whatever they're selling, and they want you to try it. One approach is to suggest it is doing an “investigation” into the effectiveness of the product. But there is no reporter, no news organization, and no investigation. Only the links to a sales site are real. What is missing is how well one approach works compared with another, what the side effects are, whether results are statistically significant, and whether the study was done using animals or humans.

Interactive source: National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (within the Institutes of Health) offers an interactive module [Know the Science: The Facts About Health News Stories](#). Some reliable resources for educating consumers include: <https://nccih.nih.gov/health/webresources#hed1>
[https://ods.od.nih.gov/Health Information/How To Evaluate Health Information on the Internet Questions and Answers.aspx](https://ods.od.nih.gov/Health%20Information/How%20To%20Evaluate%20Health%20Information%20on%20the%20Internet%20Questions%20and%20Answers.aspx) <https://medlineplus.gov/evaluatinghealthinformation.html>
[Evaluating Internet Health Information: A Tutorial from the National Library of Medicine](#)
[Health Information on the Web: Finding Reliable Information](#) (American Academy of Family Physicians)
Access the National Institutes of Health at: <https://www.nih.gov/institutes-nih/list-nih-institutes-centers-offices>
National Library of Medicine, PubMed® www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed
Office of Dietary Supplements (ODS), National Institutes of Health (NIH) <http://ods.od.nih.gov>
MedlinePlus (a service of the National Library of Medicine) www.medlineplus.gov
Ctr for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition (CFSAN) www.fda.gov/AboutFDA/CentersOffices/OfficeofFoods/CFSAN/
The Dietary Supplement Label Database—a project of the National Institutes of Health <https://dslid.nlm.nih.gov/dslid/>

*May 2019 Health Notes will cover topic of mobile health apps and report on effectiveness and usefulness of self-monitoring health devices.