Evaluating Health Information Online   269

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As information becomes increasingly available online, more and more people are turning to the Internet for answers to their health questions. A report by the Pew Research Center revealed that adults in the United States use online resources, including search engines and social networks, as significant sources of information about symptoms, treatments, and support.

There are millions of websites containing health-related information. Some of the information on these websites is reliable. Some of it is not. Some of the information is current. And, some is not. Telling the good from the bad can be a challenge, but the following guide can help you be better informed about the health information you find online.

Who Wrote It?

The Source

The first step in assessing the quality of health information found online is to consider the source. Any website that provides health information should make it easy to learn the identity of the individual, company, or organization responsible for the site and its contents.

Information about the source can usually be found in an "About Us" or "Contact Us" section of the site or on the website's homepage. This section should also contain a way to reach the source or sponsor, including an email address, phone number, and/or mailing address.

Many health and medical websites post information collected from outside sources. The original source should be clearly indicated.

Check also to see if a review panel or editorial board fact checks information before it is made available online and is listed somewhere on the website. These individuals should be experts in the subject at hand and should make any financial interests in the content clear.

If you are unable to find any of this information on the website, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Why was the page created?
2. What does the person or organization that runs the website stand to gain from the information provided?
3. Are they trying to sell me something?

The Funding

Creating and running a website cost money. The funding source of the website should be readily apparent. In many cases, the web address of the site itself can give you a hint about the type of organization that sponsors the information:

- *.gov* identifies a government agency
- *.edu* identifies an educational institution
- *.org* identifies professional organizations, such as scientific or research societies and patient advocacy groups
- *.com* identifies commercial websites, such as businesses, pharmaceutical companies, and sometimes hospitals

Quackery on the Web

Health quackery is all too common on the Internet. When assessing health information online, be on alert for these warning signs and remember the old saying, "if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is."

- Does the page advertise "breakthrough" remedies that propose a cure to a variety of disorders or that rely on a "secret ingredient"?
- Does the page use sensational language, such as lots of exclamation points?
- Does the page use overly "scientific" sounding language?
- Does the page make claims that cannot be validated elsewhere?

Taking everything you read with a healthy dose of skepticism will help you avoid the many health-related half-truths, scams, and myths that exist on the Internet.

For more information about quackery on the web, you can visit *www.quackwatch.org*. Quackwatch is an online resource guide to avoiding health fraud.

If you can identify who maintains and pays for the site, this will help you evaluate the purpose of the information they publish.

How Current Is It?

Findings from ongoing research can change the established recommendations for diagnoses, procedures, and treatments. So, it's important to have the latest information on hand in order to make smart health choices.

Websites hosting health information should post the date the content was last updated or reviewed. This date is often found at the bottom of the page. If the date isn't listed, check to see if the page has a copyright line. This will tell you when the information was originally written. If the site contains a lot of broken pages or links, this is a good indication that the site is not regularly maintained and may not have up-to-date information.

While it's a good idea to look for the most current health information available, older information isn't necessarily useless. Older articles are often provided to give readers an historical view of a disorder and its treatments.

Privacy and the Internet

Websites routinely collect information on how visitors use their sites to assess what pages are most popular and to better tailor content to meet visitor needs. However, many health-related websites may ask visitors to "Subscribe" or "Become a Member." This is often done in order to collect donations or to share relevant information as it becomes available. It is generally a good idea to register with a different username and password combination than what you use for your personal email and any online bank or credit card accounts you might have.

In other cases, "aggregate" information, such as date of birth, zip code, or gender, may be sold to third party companies. To ensure that your information is kept private, take time to read the website's policy on information sharing. This is often found at the bottom of the site's homepage.

If you are asked for personal information, be sure to find out how the information will be used. Also, do not give out your Social Security number! This is important because, sadly, there is fraud on the Internet. Even when not used fraudulently, your information may be used or sold by the website (sometimes without your knowledge or consent) depending on the site's information sharing policy.

Be careful when making purchases online. Websites without security may not protect your credit card or bank account information. Look for confirmation that the website has a "secure server" before purchasing anything on the Internet. And, be suspicious if a site asks for your credit card or banking information if you are not making a purchase or donation.

A Final Word

When looking for health information online, your greatest tool is your own common sense and good judgement. The Internet is home to websites on nearly every health topic, and you can find just as much misinformation, half-truths, and sensationalism as reliable information. Take some time to do your research before acting on any health information you find on the web. Lastly, don't count on any one source for your information. If possible, check several sites to confirm any information you find.

A 2013 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project found that 35% of adults in the United States have used online information to diagnose a condition that they or someone they know might have. Of those individuals, 35% did not visit a clinician to obtain a professional opinion. While the Internet has made accessing health information easier than ever, it is not meant to take the place of a doctor's opinion. Make sure that you discuss your health concerns, along with any information you have gathered online, with a trusted clinician or other healthcare professional.

Quick Checklist

The following checklist can be used to help you make sure that the health information you find online is reliable.

1. Can you easily identify who sponsors and/or runs the website?
2. Does the site list contact information for the source or sponsor?
3. Can you find the date the information was written on or reviewed?
4. Is your privacy protected?
5. **Does the website make claims that seem too good to be true?**

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