



Evaluating Health Information on the Web

By the Medical Library Association (<http://www.mlanet.org/resources/userguide.html#3>)

Content Evaluation Guidelines

Sponsorship

Can you easily identify the site sponsor? Sponsorship is important because it helps establish the site as respected and dependable. Does the site list advisory board members or consultants? This may give you further insights on the credibility of information published on the site.

- A government agency has .gov in the address.
- An educational institution is indicated by .edu in the address.
- A professional organization such as a scientific or research society will be identified as .org. For example, the American Cancer Society's Website is <http://www.cancer.org/>.
- Commercial sites identified by .com will most often identify the sponsor as a company, for example Merck & Co., the pharmaceutical firm.
- What should you know about .com health sites? Commercial sites may represent a specific company or be sponsored by a company using the Web for commercial reasons—to *sell products*. At the same time, many commercial Websites have valuable and credible information. **Many hospitals have .com in their address.** The site should fully disclose the sponsor of the site, including the identities of commercial and non-commercial organizations that have contributed funding, services, or material to the site.

Currency

- The site should be updated frequently. Health information changes constantly as new information is learned about diseases and treatments through research and patient care. Websites should reflect the most up-to-date information.
- The Website should be consistently available, with the date of the latest revision clearly posted. This usually appears at the bottom of the page.

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Factual information

- Information should be presented in a clear manner. It should be factual (not opinion) and capable of being verified from a primary information source such as the professional literature, abstracts, or links to other Web pages.
- **Information represented as an opinion should be clearly stated** and the source should be identified as a qualified professional or organization.

Audience

- The Website should clearly state whether the information is intended for the consumer or the health professional.
- Many health information Websites have two different areas - one for consumers, one for professionals. The design of the site should make selection of one area over the other clear to the user.

Additional Help

The Health on the Internet Foundation Code of Conduct (HONcode) for medical and health Websites (<http://www.hon.ch/HONcode/>) specifies eight principles intended to hold Web site developers to basic ethical standards and to make sure consumers always know the source and purpose of the data they are reading. Participation is voluntary throughout the world, but sites displaying the foundation's symbol are generally considered credible sources of information. Unfortunately, the number of sites participating is small.

Much of the health-related information that you find may seem to be written in a foreign language because of the highly technical terminology used in the health professions. *To help you use and understand medical terminology on the Web, the Medical Library Association has published a brochure called "Deciphering Medspeak" which is available without charge in individual copies from MLA by sending an email to info@mlahq.org.*

Health sciences librarians at hospitals and academic medical centers throughout America stand ready to help consumers with do-it-yourself search assistance or will assist by performing professional searches of the Web for consumer and professional medical literature. If you don't know whether your community has a health sciences library, you can find out by calling the MLA at (312) 419-9094.

