



Evaluating Health-Related Web Sites Or “Caveant Lectur et Viewer!” (“Let the Reader and Viewer Beware!”)

Perhaps you, like millions of people nationwide, have discovered the World Wide Web as a valuable source of information for your own health conditions or those of a loved one. By taking the initiative to learn the basics about your health issues, you will be able to communicate more effectively with your physician and play a more active role in your own health care plan.

However, for every reliable Web site out there, there are many more that proffer a lot of medical “misinformation”. The vast majority of the information on the Web is completely unregulated, much of it being published by individuals with no formal medical training and often backed, subtly or overtly, by commercial interests. To avoid falling victim to inaccurate, misleading, or incomplete medical information, evaluate each site you visit using the following criteria.

- 1. Authority:** When you access a Web document, ask yourself “*who wrote this*”? The author(s) of the document should be clearly stated, including their credentials and the institutions with which they are affiliated, as well as a mechanism for contacting them.
- 2. Objectivity:** After asking yourself, *who* wrote this document, ask “*why was it written*”? That is, what is the author’s primary purpose in publishing this document? Is it to educate, or is it to sell a product? The ownership and source of funding for the site should be prominently stated. Check the Web site’s domain code for clues. Those that emanate from government sources (“.gov”), academic institutions (“.edu”), and not-for-profit organizations (“.org”) are often more objective, while those produced by commercial sources (“.com”) are often less so.
- 3. Accuracy:** Examine the site for the *source* of the information. If any studies are quoted, look for cited references in the professional literature which will allow for independent verification. Many reputable sites have a board of experts who review the content for completeness and accuracy. Compare information from several different Web sites for consistency in their information. Look for sites that display the HON Code of Conduct (“HONcode”) as provided by the Health on the Net Foundation (<http://www.hon.ch/home.html>).
- 4. Timeliness:** Note the date of the site’s creation and its last update. Beware of a high proportion of inactive links, which may suggest a neglected site with outdated information.

Health information on the Web should be used for educational purposes only and should not be considered to be, nor substituted for, medical advice. Authoritative, reliable, and current information from the Web is a valuable resource, but in no way can it substitute for the wisdom of an experienced and caring physician. So...surf responsibly, and Caveant lector!