

Thursdays @ Maxwell

Dr. Google Will See You Now: Finding Reliable Health Information on the Web

Thursday, August 24, 2017

It's easy to find health "information" on the Internet. But which results are from reliable organizations? Even if a source is reliable, what facts are relevant for a given situation?

In this month's tech program, learn how to find trustworthy Websites for medical information, conduct searches to get the most relevant information, and navigate databases like PubMed.

Specific tips

Finding

For some useful Websites and databases, see the section on Finding health information under Resources below on page 3.

In searching the Web for health information (consulting "Dr. Google"), the techniques for searching for information in general apply:

- The more specifically you can phrase your question, the more precise Google's (or any other search engine's) results will be.
- Of course, when first looking for information, you don't know enough about the subject to be precise. The technique of **pearl building** thus becomes important:
 - You'll start with a question that is general and vague (though as precise as you can make it with your current knowledge).
 - Your search will return with several results, but most of them will seem not quite what you want.
 - Some might be a little more relevant than the others, though.
 - Using terms and ideas from those slightly-more-relevant pages, come up with a new question that gets at what you want more directly than your previous question.
 - Go back to the first step and repeat until you get results from the search engine that do address your real question.

Evaluating

- Be a cyberskeptic.
 - Quackery abounds on the Web.
 - Does the site use jargon/gobbledygook that confuses you or plain language that explains

things?

- Everyone knows the derogatory phrase Big Pharma, but there's a similar derogatory phrase for the Alternative Medicine industry: Big Placebo.
- Check for biases and conflicts of interest
 - Whose name is on the site and who provides it?
 - The site should have a link to an About page that tells you about the organization behind the Website.
 - Wikipedia will often have a page on larger organizations with national or regional scope if you want to find some outside information.
 - If there are ads on the site, are they clearly distinguished from real content?
 - Similarly, if the site offers products or services for sale, are those offers clearly distinguished from the information they are presenting?
- Check how up-to-date the information is.
 - Look for the latest information.
 - Ideally, an online article will give the date it was first published.
 - Failing that, you can get an idea of how current the information is from the dates of the sources it cites (see the next section, "Focus on quality").
 - You can't rely on the copyright date for the Webpage itself (usually at the bottom of the page) since that is probably updated automatically regardless of the actual date of the latest real changes to the page.
- Focus on quality.
 - In the About page mentioned above or in a separate page that likely would have a link to it from the About page, the site should have information about the organization's controlling board or the site's editorial board.
 - Are most of the board members health professionals?
 - Or does it seem to be controlled by people who would not be expected to have any medical or health expertise?
 - Follow the paper-trail.
 - Rely on verifiable medical research, not opinion.
 - Does the site tell you what the research was that their information is based on?

- Does it cite those sources by giving enough publication information that you would be easily able to find the source that presents the original research (whether for free online or in a research library)?
- For apps, devices, and interactive features on Websites:
 - Are the tools or resources easily usable?
 - Do they work as advertised?
 - Do they work with other tools and resources?
- Privacy and security:
 - If the site asks you to sign up for an account, a newsletter, or so on, what is the site's privacy policy?
 - While a site that provides information only might not be subject to HIPAA, it should comply with HIPAA standards before you consider sharing any information about any condition you may personally have.
- Get a 2nd opinion.
 - Consult a few different sites.
 - As in any science, there are conflicting approaches and theories even within legitimate medical science and practice.
 - Even with areas that are well understood and present few conflicts, different sites will have more or less information about a given aspect of a condition or topic.
 - Consult with your health professional.
 - Patient/provider partnerships lead to the best medical decisions.

Resources

Finding health information

General help

- [FAQ: National Library of Medicine guide to finding health information \(https://www.nlm.nih.gov/services/guide.html\)](https://www.nlm.nih.gov/services/guide.html)

Search tools

- [OCPL databases](#)

(<http://www.onlib.org/research/databases>)

- Gale Health Reference Center Academic
Journal and magazine/newsletter articles in a variety of medical fields
- Nursing and Allied Health Collection
Journal articles in nursing
- Physical Therapy and Sports Medicine Collection
Journal articles in physical therapy and sports medicine
- Salem Health
Online medical encyclopedia
- [Health information: overview](http://upstate.libguides.com/healthinfo) from Upstate Medical University
(<http://upstate.libguides.com/healthinfo>)
“Resources for patients, families and community members at large. Upstate Health Sciences Library provides public health services and resources free of charge.”
- [MedlinePlus: health information from the National Library of Medicine](https://www.medlineplus.gov/)
(<https://www.medlineplus.gov/>)
Information on various health topics, specific diseases, and drugs and supplements.
- [Health information](https://www.nih.gov/health-information)
(<https://www.nih.gov/health-information>)
A search interface for finding health information from the National Institutes for Health
- [Mental health information](https://www.nlm.nih.gov/health/topics/index.shtml) from the National Institute of Mental Health
(<https://www.nlm.nih.gov/health/topics/index.shtml>)
A search interface for finding mental health information
- [PubMed](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/)
(<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/>)
PubMed is a tool for searching medical literature from both journal articles and books.
- [PubMed help](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK3827/)
(<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK3827/>)

General guides on how to evaluate online health information

- [*Evaluating health information*](https://medlineplus.gov/evaluatinghealthinformation.html) from MedlinePlus, US National Library of Medicine
(<https://medlineplus.gov/evaluatinghealthinformation.html>)

A list of resources for finding health information and for determining how trustworthy it is.
- [*MedlinePlus guide to healthy Web surfing*](https://medlineplus.gov/healthywebsurfing.html)
(<https://medlineplus.gov/healthywebsurfing.html>)
- [*Health information on the Web: finding reliable information*](https://familydoctor.org/health-information-on-the-web-finding-reliable-information/?adfree=true) from American Academy of Family Physicians
(<https://familydoctor.org/health-information-on-the-web-finding-reliable-information/?adfree=true>)
- [*How to evaluate health information on the Internet: questions and answers*](https://ods.od.nih.gov/Health_Information/How_To_Evaluate_Health_Information_on_the_Internet_Questions_and_Answers.aspx) from the National Institutes of Health. Office of Dietary Supplements
(https://ods.od.nih.gov/Health_Information/How_To_Evaluate_Health_Information_on_the_Internet_Questions_and_Answers.aspx)
- [*Evaluating Internet health information: a tutorial from the National Library of Medicine*](https://medlineplus.gov/webeval/webeval.html)
(<https://medlineplus.gov/webeval/webeval.html>)

Takes 16 minutes; requires the Flash plug-in.