

EVALUATING ONLINE HEALTH INFORMATION



On a typical day some 10 million Americans now turn to the web for health information, and most start by employing a search engine. However, research shows that most do not verify the source and date of the information they found. Here are some guidelines to use when you are critically evaluating online health information.

Types of Web Pages

Advocacy: The intent of these pages is to support an issue. Their web address frequently ends with **.org** (organization).

- e.g.* American Cancer Society, <http://www.cancer.org>
- e.g.* American Heart Association, <http://www.americanheart.org>

Marketing/Business: These pages are sponsored by a commercial body and are used primarily to promote or sell products. Their web address frequently ends with **.com**

- e.g.* Lipitor, <http://www.lipitor.com/>
- e.g.* Melatonin.com: <http://melatonin.com/>

Informational: These pages present factual information. Educational institutions or government agencies often sponsor these pages. Their web addresses end with **.edu** and **.gov**, respectively.

- e.g.* Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), <http://www.cdc.gov>
- e.g.* National Center for Health Statistics, <http://www.nlm.nih.gov>

News: These pages present current news on a variety of topics. Their web address often ends with **.com**

- e.g.* CNN, <http://www.cnn.com>
- e.g.* MSNBC, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com>

Personal: These pages are published by an individual, and their web address may end in **.com**, **.edu**, **.net**, or **.org**

- e.g.* Marmalade Moon, <http://www.marmalademoon.com>

Entertainment: These pages are intended to be recreational, and their web address usually ends in **.com**

- e.g.* Neopets, <http://www.neopets.com>

Types of Web Page Address (URL) Domains

The URL or address of a web page often carries information about the source of the information. There are 5 primary domains for U.S. pages:

.edu (education)	ranges from serious research to student pages
.gov (government)	factual information, usually reliable
.org (organization)	not-for-profit organizations, usually advocacy pages
.com (commercial)	commercial sites that usually promote or sell products
.net (network)	network providers that include both commercial and individual sites

Criteria for Evaluation

Author/Sponsorship: Determine the author or sponsor of the page. Look for credentials of the author and contact information, including e-mail address, phone number and postal address. From the author's credentials provided, determine if they are qualified to write this page. Look at the URL for the domain provider in the URL. Visit the home page for the site that hosts the information.

Bad Example: RYT Hospital

<http://www.rythospital.com/2008/>

Good Example: National Diabetes Information Clearinghouse (NDIC)

<http://www.diabetes.niddk.nih.gov/>

Accuracy: Check the page for accurate information.

Bad Example: The True but Little Known Facts about Women and AIDS, with Documentation

<http://147.129.226.1/library/research/AIDSFacts.htm>

Good Example: HIV/AIDS Among Women,

<http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/women/resources/factsheets/women.htm>

Coverage/Scope: Many health sites are not comprehensive. Determine the intended audience for this page. What is the depth of coverage for the information presented? Is the purpose of this page to inform, explain, persuade, market a product, or advocate a cause?

Bad Example: Dihydrogen Monoxide , <http://www.dhmo.org>

Good Example: MedlinePlus, <http://medlineplus.gov>

Bias/Objectivity: Determine if the material is presented without any political, ideological, cultural, religious, or institutional biases. Check for any conflicts of interest.

Bad Example: Toilet Training: Signs of Readiness,

http://www.pampers.com/en_US/parenting-articles/potty-training-signs-of-readiness/4614

Good Example: National Multiple Sclerosis Society,

<http://www.nationalmssociety.org>

Currency: Determine when this page was created or last revised. Determine how often the material on this page is updated. Is the material current and up-to-date? Determine if the page is complete or still "under construction." Do the hypertext links on this page send you to active web pages?

Bad Example: Risks/Benefits of Hormone Replacement Therapy Examined,

<http://www.pslgroup.com/dg950925.htm>

Good Example: WHI Study Data Confirm Short-Term Heart Disease Risks of Combination Hormone Therapy for Postmenopausal Women,

<http://www.nih.gov/news/health/feb2010/nhlbi-15.htm>

Other: Health on the Net Foundation <<http://www.hon.ch/>> and **URAC** <<http://www.urac.org/>> are two organizations that provide guidelines for consumer health information on the Internet. Sites that meet these criteria are eligible to display the following "trust marks".



WEB PAGE EVALUATION CHECKLIST

Address (URL) of web page being evaluated: _____

Author/Sponsorship

Who is the author of this web page?

What contact information for the author is given? e-mail address:

postal address:

phone number:

What credentials qualify this author to write this web page?

Which URL domain supports this web page? .edu .gov .org .com .net .other

Accuracy

Are there sources (references) provided for any factual information?

Is this page free of grammatical, spelling, and typographical errors?

Coverage/Scope

Who is the intended audience for this page?

Does the page meet the needs of the its stated audience?

Is the topic covered in-depth or is it a brief overview?

Objectivity

Does this page present its information with any political, ideological, cultural, religious, or institutional biases?

Does the author of this page show any conflict of interest?

If the information presented is an opinion, is this clearly stated?

Currency

What is the date this page was created or last revised?

Is there any indication of how often the material on this page is updated?

Is this page complete or is it still “under construction?”

Are the hypertext links on this page made to active sites?

Other

Does the page display “trust marks” for following established guidelines (HonCode or URAC)?