



Using the Internet for Medical Advice



Northern California Cancer Center

Questions to Ask

The number of Web sites offering health-related resources grows every day. Many sites provide valuable information, while others may have information that is unreliable or misleading. Don't believe everything you see on the Internet. *Talk with your doctor about the medical advice you find and make sure the information makes sense for you.*

Here are some questions to keep in mind when using the Internet for medical advice.

Who runs this site?

All Web sites should include the name of the organization that sponsors it.

What is the purpose of the site?

Know who runs and pays for the site. An "About This Site" link appears on many sites; if it's there, use it. The purpose of the site should be clearly stated and help you evaluate the trustworthiness of the information.

Who pays for the site?

It costs money to run a Web site. Find out if the site includes advertisements such as "banner ads." Think about the company that pays for the site; they may only want you to know about their services or products. Web addresses ending in ".gov" mean it is a government sponsored site, ".edu" is an educational organization, ".org" is usually a not-for-profit organization, and ".com" is a company or business.

Where does the information come from?

Many health/medical sites post information collected from other Web sites or sources. If the person or organization in charge of the site did not create the information, the original source should be clearly labeled.

How is the information selected?

Does this site have an advisory or editorial board? Is it clear that people with appropriate medical qualifications review the material before it is posted?

How current is the information?

Web sites need to be reviewed and updated on a regular basis. It is important that medical information be current and that its most recent update or review date appears on the site. Even if the information has not changed, you need to know that the site “owners” have reviewed it recently to make sure the information is still correct. The date is usually found at the bottom of the page in small print.

How can users contact the Web site “owners”?

There should always be a way for you to contact the site owners with problems, feedback and questions. This is usually in the “contact us” link found on their website.

How do chat room or discussions groups work?

If the site has a chat room or other online discussion areas, it should tell you how the service works. Does someone lead it? By whom, and why? It is always a good idea to spend time reading the discussion before joining in, so that you feel comfortable with the environment before you get involved. Just remember that someone else’s experience may not be the same as yours.

How does the site choose links to other sites?

Web sites usually offer links to other sites. Some medical sites have a policy about links and others do not. Some link to any site that asks or pays for a link. Others only link to sites that have met certain criteria.

What information about you does the site collect, and why?

Web sites routinely track the paths visitors take through their sites to determine what pages are being used. However, many health Web sites ask you to “subscribe” or “become a member.” In some cases, this request is to collect a membership fee or select information for you that is relevant to your concerns. In all cases, this will give the site personal information about you.

Any credible health site asking for this kind of information should tell you exactly what they will and will not do with it. Many commercial sites sell “aggregate” (collected) data about their users to other companies; for example, information such as what percentage of their users are women with breast cancer. In some cases they may collect and reuse information that is “personally identifiable,” such as your ZIP code, gender and birth date. Be certain that you read and understand any privacy policy or similar language on the site. Don’t sign up for anything that you are not sure you fully understand.

About This Information

We hope this information has been helpful to you. Some of it has been provided by the National Cancer Institute and the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine of the National Institutes of Health. It is not intended to substitute for the medical expertise and advice of your health care provider. We encourage you to discuss any decisions about treatment or care with your health care provider.



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