For Health Consumers and Patients

Find Good Health Information

A 2015 Pew Research Center Study (http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/09/15/libraries-at-the-crossroads/) reveals that "73% of all those ages 16 and over say libraries contribute to people finding the health information they need. 42% of those who have gone online at a library using its computers, internet connections or Wi-Fi have done so for health-related searches."

In 2013, the Pew Research Internet Project (http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/12/04/health-and-technology-in-the-u-s/) reported that "59% of U.S. adults say they have looked online for information about a range of health topics in the past year. 35% of U.S. adults say they have gone online specifically to try to figure out what medical condition they or someone else might have." Whether the health information is needed for personal reasons or for a loved one, millions of health-related web pages are viewed by millions of consumers. Sometimes the information found is just what was needed. Other searches end in frustration or retrieval of inaccurate, even dangerous, information.

This guide outlines the collective wisdom of medical librarians who search the web every day to discover quality information in support of clinical and scientific decision making by doctors, scientists, and other health practitioners responsible for the nation's health. This guide is supported by the Medical Library Association (MLA), the library organization whose primary purpose is promoting quality information for improved health and whose members were the first to realize that not all health information on the web is credible, timely, or safe.

The guide is presented in three brief sections. The first section, "Getting Started (https://www.mlanet.org/page/find-good-health-information#start)," provides tips on filtering health-related web pages through the health subsets of major search engines and using quality electronic finding tools developed by the U.S. government to do an initial screen of websites for further examination. This section is followed by a set of guidelines (https://www.mlanet.org/page/find-good-health-information#guidelines)
developed for evaluating the content of health-related websites. The final section (https://www.mlanet.org/page/find-good-health-information#help) points to other information of interest to consumers searching for health-related information on the web.

Getting Started

As many people have discovered, clicking on a favorite search engine and entering a disease or medical condition can often result in thousands, even millions, of "hits." This can be discouraging. Here are a few ideas for filtering the available web pages to a manageable number:

1. If you are using a search engine such as Google or Bing, take advantage of the advanced searching features of the sites so that you can combine terms to make your retrieval more precise. For example, entering the term "cancer" and "chemotherapy" linked together is more powerful and precise than trying to read through all the hits found by simply entering the general term "cancer."

2. Become familiar with the general health information finding tools such as MedlinePlus (http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/) (http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/), produced by the National Library of Medicine, or Healthfinder (http://www.healthfinder.gov/) (http://www.healthfinder.gov) from the US Department of Health and Human Services, which can get you started by pointing you to good, credible health information quickly. The Medical Library Association's "Top Health Websites (p/cm/id/fid=397)" is another device to help you start your search with a highly selective list of quality consumer health information sites trusted by medical librarians.

3. When you have found sites that look relevant, use the guidelines below to help you decide whether the information is as credible, timely, and useful as it looks.

Guidelines for Evaluating Content

1. Who is sponsoring the website?

   - 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.
   - The web address itself can provide additional information about the nature of the site and the sponsor's intent.
     - 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 (http://www.cancer.org/) website is http://www.cancer.org/ (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 noncommercial organizations that have contributed funding, services, or material to the site.
2: How often is the site updated?
- 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.

3. Does the site present facts and not opinion?
- 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 websites.
- Information represented as an opinion should be clearly stated and the source should be identified as a qualified professional or organization.

4. Who is the intended 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
- What did my Doctor Say (p/cm/ld/fid=580)? 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 this "medspeak" terminology on the web, the Medical Library Association makes available the "What did my Doctor Say?" site to translate medical terms into plain language.
- Find a librarian to help you (http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/libraries.html): Health sciences librarians at hospitals and academic medical centers, as well as public librarians trained in offering health information, stand ready to help consumers with search assistance or may assist by performing professional searches of the web for consumer and professional medical literature. The MedlinePlus website can help you find a library (http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/libraries.html) in your area. If you are looking for a library that can answer cancer-related questions, consult this list compiled by the Cancer Libraries Section (p/cm/ld/fid=908).
- Top health websites (p/cm/ld/fid=397): MLA's Consumer and Patient Health Information Section regularly reviews websites for inclusion on MLA's "Top Health Websites" page.
- Recommended websites for cancer information (p/cm/ld/fid=909): The resources listed here provide general information for patients, caregivers, and librarians. Members of the Cancer Librarians Section of MLA have reviewed these resources for quality (currency, credibility, content, audience, and more).

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