Evaluating the Credibility of Health Websites: Can You Trust Dr. Google?

How to Tell if It's Legit

There are several tools available to evaluate health websites. Most of them list criteria that reliable websites should meet. Here is a summary of the main criteria to look out for:

Author — The website should clearly identify the author, institution, and editorial board (the people responsible for the professional review of the content).

Date — The website should contain current scientific information, and the content should be updated regularly.

Objectivity — The website should be evidence-based and objective (factual) in its content, listing benefits and risks (e.g., side effects). The website should mention other treatment options, if available, including no treatment, and it should encourage patients to consult with a health care professional.

Purpose — The website should state its purpose clearly. Any advertising should be clearly marked and separated from the site's main content.

Transparency — The website should identify its ownership, sources of funding, and explain how it collects and uses personal information.

Usability — The website should be easy to use, well-organized, and well-designed. It should provide a way of contacting the owner of the site.

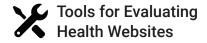
There will be some credible websites that don't meet all the criteria. Likewise, there will be unreliable websites that look very slick and seem to meet all of them. Ultimately, the only way to know if online health information is accurate is to find the source and read the scientific study being referenced. Learning how to evaluate for the credible criteria, however, will help you start filtering.

Examples of Credible Health Websites

The Medical Library Association has put together a list of pre-screened health websites called the *MLA Top Health Websites*. These websites can be accessed on the CAPHIS — Consumer and Patient Health Information Section — site: www.mlanet.org/page/top-health-websites.

Red Flags

- ! The website relies on single cases or personal testimonials.
- ! The information is presented in a sensational, overly emotional, or alarmist way.
- ! The website implies that a treatment affects everyone in the same way (e.g., 100% success rate).
- I The website is trying to sell you something.
- ! It is not clear who the author is or what qualifications or conflicts of interest he or she has.
- ! Studies are referenced, but they are old (from 10 years ago or more) or the year of publication is not provided.
- ! Links are broken this could indicate that the site has not been updated recently and that the health information could be outdated.



DISCERN

A validated instrument that enables patients and information providers to judge the quality of written consumer health information. It consists of 15 questions and a rating scale.

HONcode

A set of principles for evaluating websites and a certification seal that websites can obtain after being assessed by the Health On the Net (HON) expert team.

JAMA Benchmarks

Four criteria to score to a website (0 to 4 points) based on authorship, attribution, disclosure, and currency.



Questions or comments about CADTH or this tool?



Online: cadth.ca



Email:

requests@cadth.ca



@CADTH_ACMTS



New at CADTH Newsletter: cadth.ca/subscribe

References

Aslani A, Pournik O, Abu-Hanna A, Eslami S. Web-site evaluation tools: a case study in reproductive health information. Stud Health Technol Inform. 2014;205:895-9.

Chumber S, Huber J, Ghezzi P. A methodology to analyze the quality of health information on the internet: the example of diabetic neuropathy. Diabetes Educ. 2015 Feb;41(1):95-105.

DISCERN online: quality criteria for consumer health information [Internet]. Oxford, UK: University of Oxford, Division of Public Health and Primary Health Care [cited 2016 Jan 27]. Available from: www.discern.org.uk

Golterman L, Banasiak NC. Evaluating web sites: reliable child health resources for parents. Pediatr Nurs. 2011 Mar-Apr;37(2):81-3.

HONcode: Principles - Quality and trustworthy health information [Internet]. Chene-Bourg, Switzerland: Health On the Net Foundation; 2013 Sep 19 [cited 2016 Jan 27]. Available from: www.healthonnet.org/HONcode/Conduct.html

Khazaal Y, Chatton A, Cochand S, Coquard O, Fernandez S, Khan R, et al. Brief DISCERN, six questions for the evaluation of evidence-based content of health-related websites. Patient Educ Couns. 2009 Oct;77(1):33-7.

Monheit DF. Evaluating health information web sites for credibility. J Hospital Librarianship. 2011 Feb 2;11(1):39-44.

Silberg WM, Lundberg GD, Musacchio RA. Assessing, controlling, and assuring the quality of medical information on the Internet: Caveant lector et viewor--Let the reader and viewer beware. JAMA. 1997 Apr 16;277(15):1244-5.

Yaqub M, Ghezzi P. Adding dimensions to the analysis of the quality of health information of websites returned by Google: cluster analysis identifies patterns of websites according to their classification and the type of intervention described. Front Public Health. 2015 Aug 25;3:204.

DISCLAIMER

This material is made available for informational purposes only and no representations or warranties are made with respect to its fitness for any particular purpose; this document should not be used as a substitute for professional medical advice or for the application of professional judgment in any decision-making process. Users may use this document at their own risk. The Canadian Agency for Drugs and Technologies in Health (CADTH) does not guarantee the accuracy, completeness, or currency of the contents of this document. CADTH is not responsible for any errors or omissions, or injury, loss, or damage arising from or relating to the use of this document and is not responsible for any third-party materials contained or referred to herein. Subject to the aforementioned limitations, the views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of Health Canada, Canada's provincial or territorial governments, other CADTH funders, or any third-party supplier of information. This document is subject to copyright and other intellectual property rights and may only be used for non-commercial, personal use or private research and study.

ABOUT CADTH

CADTH is an independent, not-for-profit organization responsible for providing Canada's health care decision-makers with objective evidence to help make informed decisions about the optimal use of drugs and medical devices in our health care system.

