

# finding credible websites

Today, more and more patients are turning to the Internet for health related information. The second most commonly searched sites are related to healthcare (you can guess what is number one!). It is not uncommon for patients to visit their physicians with a briefcase full of material that they have downloaded from the Internet. Thanks to the Internet, patients are much more medically sophisticated and much better informed.

However, the Internet is a double-edged sword and can provide patients with erroneous information or information that is blatantly wrong. So what are patients to do?

Any credible website should clearly indicate who is responsible for the site and for the information. This information should be clearly visible on every page. The letters at the end of the web address can often identify credible sites. For example, .gov indicates that the government sponsors the site, .edu indicates educational institutions, noncommercial sites use .org, while .com denotes a commercial enterprise and usually indicates a for-profit company. Thus, non-profit organizations probably do not have a conflict of interest, while a for-profit company probably does.

Credible websites clearly document the evidence on which the material is based. If the site provides facts, figures, and graphs, they should have references that document the source of the material. Also, opinions or advice should be set apart from information that is evidence-based or derived from research. The site should give information about the credentials of the people who prepared or wrote the material. You would also want to know if there are any conflicts of interest with the authors or reviewers. For example, if an article talks about a drug or the use of a piece of equipment, you would want to know if the author is paid by the pharmaceutical company that makes the drug or if the doctor works for the company that manufactures the device.

Websites are always under construction. Websites should be reviewed and updated regularly. It is particularly important that medical information be current, and that the most recent update or review date be posted. Even if the information hasn't changed, it's helpful to know that the site owners have reviewed it recently to ensure that it's still valid. As a rule of thumb, material should not be more than five years old. Information more than ten years old is probably obsolete.

A good site should allow you to interact with the site or the organization. You should be able to contact the site if you have questions and you would like to communicate with the organization. Most sites will have a "contact us" tab that allows visitors to easily interact with the site.



Most credible websites will not have anything to sell or promote. Sites that are motivated to sell you a product or a service are probably less credible than those that are motivated to provide you with information.

Any e-mail messages should be carefully evaluated. The origin of the message and its purpose should be considered. Some companies or organizations use e-mail to advertise products or attract people to their websites. The accuracy of health-related information may be influenced by the desire to promote a product or service. It's important to carefully consider the source of e-mail and other Internet-based information and to discuss the information with your physician.

Bottom line: The Internet has become an integral part of most people's lives. The role of the Internet has become part and parcel in the lives of most doctors' patients and potential patients. It is each individual doctor's responsibility to lead them to credible websites in order that they might have useful information that may help the patient and the doctor make good healthcare decisions.



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