

Finding Medical Help Online

What are the benefits and risks involved in using the Internet for health information and resources?

Whenever I attend medical meetings, I often hear doctors sharing war stories of patients who bring in thick piles of computer printouts from the Internet.

From the doctors' viewpoint, if they don't take the time to read the articles, their patients may be upset. On the other hand, most doctors don't have (or won't take) the time to enter into what they see as long discussions about potentially false or misleading information. They've seen more than one patient who believes, "If it's on the Internet, it must be true!"

Doctors, more than most any other group, know how much bad medical and health information is disseminated via the Internet. As a result, I've had more than one person tell me that their doctor has strictly advised them not to search for information on the Internet.

A recent medical report lists about 100 studies that attempted to rate the accuracy and completeness of health information on the World Wide Web. Ratings ranged from about 15 percent to 85 percent. In one survey of people seeking health care information on the Internet, 82 percent reported they were concerned about getting online health information from an unreliable source.

Fortunately, you can reduce that worry by following a few basic guidelines:

1. Rarely visit just a single Web site and never make snap decisions based on what you find.
2. Avoid search engines and depend on a number of trusted sites from which you can begin

your research.

HOW TO CHOOSE THE BEST SITES

Here are some important factors to consider when you're looking for medical information online:

1. Is the site regularly updated and are the dates of posting or revision easy to find? For example, a Web page on "grief" may not need to be revised often, whereas information on the "latest treatment of AIDS" needs to be current.
2. Does the site state how information is reviewed and updated? Does the site have an editorial or advisory board? Is the information reviewed before it is posted? This information is often on the "About Us" page, or under the organization's mission statement, or part of the annual report.
3. Are the board members experts in the subject? For example, a site on heart disease whose medical advisory board is composed of attorneys and accountants may not be medically authoritative.
4. Does the site give references and sources for its information?
5. Does the site provide information about the organization or individual who compiled the site? Again, the "About Us" section may tell who runs the site. Is it a branch of the federal government, a nonprofit institution, a professional organization, a health system, a commercial organization or an individual?

There is a big difference between a site that states, "I developed this site after finding a cure for cancer that doctors are hiding from you" and one that says, "This page on cancer was developed by health professionals at the American Cancer Society."

6. Does the organization list an address or other contact details? If the site provides no contact information, or if you can't easily find out who runs the site, be cautious.
7. Does the site have spelling and grammatical mistakes? More than a couple errors indicate a weak site that has not been properly edited or reviewed.

8. Does the site make health claims that seem too good to be true? Does it promise quick, dramatic, miraculous results? Is this the only site making these claims? Beware of claims that one remedy will cure a variety of illnesses, that it is a “breakthrough,” or that it relies on a “secret ingredient.”
9. Is the site based on evidence or testimonials? Rely on sites that cite medical research, not opinion.
10. Is the organization trying to sell something? If so, this may bias their information.
There are many excellent, medically reliable, evidence-based Web sites that are invaluable for my patients (and for me). Informed health consumers who know and understand their treatment options and the risk, benefits and costs of those options, tend to:
 11. become more expert in their own health, diseases and disorders
 12. ask for and receive the best care
 13. have fewer medical errors during their care
 14. become more highly healthy.

RESPECTED HEALTH SOURCES

The following is a list and description of some of my favorite sites:

15. (). At my site you can sign up for a free, twice-a-week e-mail that will keep you informed with the latest “Health News You Can Use.” You can also access my free “Health Assessment Tools.”
16. Health on the Net Foundation (HON) () is a not-for-profit organization based in Switzerland, established to guide people to useful and reliable sources of online medical and health information.
17. Bandolier () is a respected source of evidence-based health care information worldwide. The “Healthy Living Zone” looks at the latest research and advice on staying healthy. Bandolier also has a section describing the risks associated with treatments such as the potential harms and benefits of taking daily low-dose aspirin.

18. Clinical Evidence () is an international source of medical information that provides a regularly updated guide to the latest evidence on the effectiveness of more than 200 medical conditions and 2,000 treatments.
19. National Library of Medicine (). Many useful health databases are accessible via this site.
20. Medline Plus () provides information on more than 700 conditions and diseases (see "Health Topics" section), and access to information about medicines and supplements, in addition to a medical encyclopedia, a medical dictionary and a medical news section. It is updated daily.
21. Pub Med () is a service of the National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health that includes more than 16 million citations for biomedical articles dating back to the 1950s.
22. Discovery Health (). This popular resource (I serve as the medical director for portions of this Web site) has much useful information, including an "Animated Body Atlas" and a comprehensive "Disease and Conditions" encyclopedia.
23. Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database () and (). These are my favorite alternative and natural medicine Web sites. The first lists information on more than 5,000 herbs, vitamins and supplements. The second is a quality test lab that can help you find reliable natural medicines. Both sites are subscription based.

MORE PATIENT HELP IS COMING

Recent surveys at the Pew Internet and American Life Project revealed some striking data about adults from the United States who had gone online for health information:

24. Ninety-two percent said that the last time they went online they found what they were looking for.
 25. Eighty-one percent said they learned something new.
 26. Eighty-eight percent said the information they found improved the way they took care of their health.
- Of those who found health information online, 94 percent said it was either "very easy" or "somewhat easy." And of the 37

percent who discussed the results of their searches with a health professional, a small minority said that their health professional disagreed with the information they found online.

Choosing an online health information resource is like choosing your doctor—you simply wouldn't go to just any doctor and you may get opinions from several doctors.

More and more people are going to become Internet active and there will be more and more patient-centered online support networks and tools for people to use. These tools will equip, empower and enable you to become the health care quarterback of your and your family's health—that's good.

Having an excellent coach—your family's personal physician—is critical. But when it comes to the stewardship of the temple of the Holy Spirit, that obligation, responsibility and opportunity should rest in your hands.

Doctors who continue to believe that their patients are inherently incapable of navigating the plentiful health resources of the Internet will find their net-savvy patients leaving them for other doctors.

By contrast, those wise and caring doctors who realize that they have just as much to learn from their patients, as the patients have to learn from them will (and should) become the physicians of choice for most health care consumers.

Walt Larimore, M.D., is one of America's best-known Christian family physicians. He is the author of *God's Design for the Highly Healthy Person* (Zondervan), from which portions of this article were adapted. Visit www.waltlarimore.com for more information on this subject and many other health-related topics.