

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).
- ! 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.

Tools for Evaluating Health Websites

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

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