



Evaluating Health Websites with Online Checklists

Over 80% of Americans have searched the internet for health information. The Internet provides a wealth of information from a wide variety of sources and viewpoints. It is accessible at any time and anywhere; offers privacy and anonymity; and may lead to increased communication between patients and their health care provider.

But for some consumers, the internet may create information overload; may seem disorganized; and be too technical. There can be privacy issues, so always review the sites privacy policy if you are submitting any personal information.

Beyond having tons of information available, the Internet is a free-for-all. Anyone can post information and it is not necessarily reviewed for accuracy or edited by anyone.

One of the easiest ways to identify the reliability of a health information website is to use a checklist. This checklist was developed by the University of Wisconsin Libraries. It uses key questions to ask when thinking about the credibility of ANY web site. It is available at: <http://staff.library.wisc.edu/instruction/instrmat/custom/evalweb.pdf>

Six major questions will help you determine the reliability of a health website.

What? <input type="checkbox"/>	<p>WHAT is the site about? Does it have the kind of information you need?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Look at the browser title bar, document title, content and links.
Who? <input type="checkbox"/>	<p>WHO created the page/site? Can you find and verify the author's qualification, whether an individual or organization?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Look for "About the author/About us" links for author's name and contact information. Verify author's qualifications in another source, e.g., journal, encyclopedia, directory, etc. Look for a link to the home page of the Web site where the document lives. Look at the parts of the URL, or address to find organization affiliation.
Where? <input type="checkbox"/>	<p>WHERE is the information coming from?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Look at the address or URL: .edu=educational, .com=commercial, .org=organizational, .gov=government, two letter country codes Look up domain owner with Whois search (http://www.networksolutions.com/whois/index.html)
Why? <input type="checkbox"/>	<p>WHY is this site on the Web and how does it affect the information?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Look at "About us/Mission/Purpose", links, content and advertising. Determine purpose of the site <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advocacy or "sales" (tries to persuade) Informational (often multiple viewpoints and references) Business or marketing (tries to sell) Entertainment Choose sites whose purposes are compatible with your information needs.
How? <input type="checkbox"/>	<p>HOW accurate or credible is this page?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Examine references and bibliographies. Verify information in another reputable source (e.g., encyclopedia, journal, book, another Web site) Find notice many errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar, etc., question the accuracy of other information.
When? <input type="checkbox"/>	<p>WHEN was the page or information created? Is the date important for the timeliness of the content?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Look for dates. Can you tell what they mean? Publication or copyright date? Last modified or updated? Date any statistics were gathered or published?

1. **WHAT** is the site about? Does it have the kind of information you need? Record the web page title and web site for future use.
2. **WHO** created the site? Can you find and verify the author's qualifications, whether an individual or organization? Look for "About the author/About us" links.
3. **WHERE** is the information coming from? Is it a reliable source? Look at the URL address. Generally .edu, .gov, and some .org sites are reliable. Be more cautious with .biz or .com sites. .edu=educational, .gov=government, .org=organization, .biz=business, .com=commercial.
4. **WHY** is the site on the Web and how does it affect the information you are seeking? Look at "About us/Mission/Purpose", links, content, and advertising. Choose sites whose purposes are compatible with your information needs.
5. **WHEN** was the page or information created? Is the date important for the timeliness of the content? Look for publication or copyright dates, last modified or updated, when data was gathered or published.
6. **HOW** accurate or credible is the site? Are there references listed? Can you verify the information with another reputable source? If you notice many errors in spelling, grammar, etc. question the accuracy of the information.

There is also a slightly more detailed check list called DISCERN accessed at <http://www.discern.org.uk/> This is a 15 item checklist geared toward health information web sites only.

No matter how you determine the reliability of health information, anything you read on the Internet should be discussed with a licensed health care provider.

Discussion Questions and Activities:

1. How often do you seek out health information on the Web?
2. How do you determine if the website you are viewing is reliable?
3. Go to the UW-Libraries website and print the Worksheet for Evaluating Websites. The next time you are accessing a health website, answer the check list questions. How reliable is this site?