



Consumer Health Decisions # 7

Reliable Health Websites Using Rating/Accreditation Symbols

Consumers generally say they are concerned about the reliability of the health information they find on the Internet. However, many people do not spend enough time making sure they are getting good information.

How can consumers know if health information on the Internet is reliable? Information on the web sites of academic or medical centers may be timely and the latest research but they are continually changing. For example, every day you hear that more and more is being discovered about research on the use of stem cells for healing, but the research is incomplete. Even though there are some answers, the story is not complete.

Overall .edu, .gov, and some .org sites are generally credible and are more trustworthy than .com or .biz sites. So, here is a tool that may help you identify trustworthy information. Rating or accreditation symbols may be used on websites to help identify reliability.



The HON code stands for Health on the Net Code. HON sites must complete an application saying they will adhere to 8 principles. The authors or organizations applying for accreditation must have completed the application to meet these principles. If completed the HON code symbol will appear on their web site. The disclaimer is a good indication that the website is not promoting dubious health practices. Organizations must apply; but not all reliable sites have necessarily done so.

When looking for reliable health information websites use the following to guide your search:



- The number-one principle that HON code subscribers must adhere to is admitting that what they do cannot ever replace the relationship between a patient and health care provider
- Look for similar “disclaimers” where the HON code does not appear

←←←The HON code symbol will appear somewhere on the home page of the website that has met the eight principles of the Health on the Net Code.

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. Why is it important to know whether the health website you are visiting is reliable?
2. If you were reviewing a health website that was new to you, how would you know if it were reliable?
3. Take a look at the health websites you visit most often. Do they use the HON code or a disclaimer statement on the site?