



## **CUT THROUGH THE CLUTTER: FIND HEALTH INFO ON THE WEB**

If you look for information about health on the Internet — either for yourself or someone else — you are not alone. Research shows that one in three American adults have gone online to search for information about a medical condition.<sup>1</sup> You may want to check out treatment options for a diagnosed condition, find out how to talk to your doctor about symptoms you've been experiencing, or see how other Sailors or Marines are managing a similar health concern. Whatever the reason, the Internet can be a quick and easy place to find the credible health information you are looking for. However, the Internet can provide a wealth of misinformation as well. Anyone can publish a website or post information — or their opinions — in community forums, on blogs, and through social media. The following questions will help you learn how to evaluate the websites where you are searching for health information to identify fact from fiction. And, always talk to your health care provider about the information you find — they can make sure you have the right information and explain any technical language you come across.

### **Question 1: Who manages the site and why?**

Identify what organization runs the site and for what purpose — both should be clear. Is the site funded by the Department of Defense (DoD), federal government, a university, a health organization or non-profit, a hospital, or a business? Ask yourself why this organization manages this website and if the authors may have a hidden agenda, such as selling product or service. Does the site provide health information to help educate audiences, promote a particular opinion, or advertise a product? A business may provide you with helpful information, but many are also trying to sell you a product or a service and may not report all the facts. On the other hand, the goal of government agency websites is to provide credible information to help people learn about health conditions, treatment options, or resources.

The ending of a web address, or URL, can generally give you a hint about the website owners. For example .mil or .gov indicates that the website belongs to a DoD or federal governmental organization, .org indicates the site belongs to a non-profit, and .edu belongs to an educational institution. A URL ending in .com often belongs to a business, but it can also belong to a hospital, medical center, or non-profit health organization. Sometimes programs or websites sponsored by DoD or the federal government, especially for health-related information, can also be a .com, .org or .net. You should look at the "About Us" section to see who publishes the site and why they are providing this information. If you can't clearly find who manages the site and why, be cautious of the source and information provided.

<sup>1</sup> Fox, S, Duggan, M. Health Online 2013. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project; 2013.

## Question 2: Does the site present facts or opinions?

You should rely on unbiased information supported by research or evidence, rather than opinions. You also can look at other relevant sites to see if they back up the same facts or if the “facts” turn out to be someone’s opinion. Look at the source of the information for clues:

- ▶ Check out the author — the author should be identified as a qualified professional or organization. Does the author have credentials, expertise, or training to provide accurate and credible information? An organization is considered credible if it is a DoD or federal government health-related agency, a medical facility, or an organization (e.g., non-profit, professional association) that brings together qualified health professionals.
- ▶ There are websites that summarize information from other websites or resources. If there is no author or the organization that manages the site did not write the information, the original source should be clearly identified. Reliable sources of information should come from medical journals, the federal government, universities/medical schools, health care facilities, and non-profit organizations.
- ▶ Opinions and testimonials should be clearly stated and the specific source should be listed. Remember, one person’s opinion or personal story is based on their experience, and may not be based on fact or proven by research. Be careful when using chat rooms, community forums, question and answer sites, and bulletin boards. Unless a website clearly indicates who is responding and that they are a credible source, you really don’t know who is providing the information and can’t be sure it is accurate.

## Question 3: Is the site up-to-date?

Health care is continually changing and new advances are being made as researchers and doctors learn more about health conditions and treatments. The information you are looking at should be current. Look to see when the information was published or when the page was last updated. Revision and review dates are posted at the bottom of a page, and typically, information should be reviewed at least annually.

## Need to talk to your doctor?

Take a look at the tip sheet,  
**Tips for Talking to your  
Doctor** [www.med.navy.mil/  
sites/nmcphc/Documents/  
health-promotion-wellness/  
general-tools-and-programs/  
hp-toolbox/HPW\\_factsheet\\_  
TalkDoctor.pdf](http://www.med.navy.mil/sites/nmcphc/Documents/health-promotion-wellness/general-tools-and-programs/hp-toolbox/HPW_factsheet_TalkDoctor.pdf).

### Works Consulted

Find and Evaluate Health Information on the Web. Medical Library Association website. [https://www.mlanet.org/  
resources/userguide.html](https://www.mlanet.org/resources/userguide.html). Accessed 4 September 2014.

Evaluating Health Information. UCSF Medical Center website. [http://www.ucsfhealth.org/education/evaluating\\_  
health\\_information/](http://www.ucsfhealth.org/education/evaluating_health_information/). Accessed 4 September 2014.

MedlinePlus Guide to Health Web Surfing. U.S. National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health website. <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/healthywebsurfing.html>. Updated 18 April 2012. Accessed 4 September 2014.