

Health Information on the Internet

The Internet can be a valuable source of health and medical information. Sometimes, however, medical information on the Internet may be overly simplified, incomplete, or even inaccurate.

An article in the May 23/30, 2001, issue of *JAMA* discusses the accessibility, quality, and readability of health information available on the Internet in English and Spanish.

CONSULT WITH YOUR DOCTOR ON ALL MAJOR MEDICAL AND HEALTH DECISIONS

The Internet includes some Web sites that are a good source for health information for you and your loved ones. You should use Internet sources for additional information and not as a substitute for consultation with your doctor. You should check with your doctor before making any major changes to your diet or physical activity and before adding any medicines or nutritional supplements (such as vitamins, minerals, and/or herbs) to your diet. It is also important to let your doctor know about any supplements or medicines that you are taking because they may have interactions with other medications or make the medications less effective.

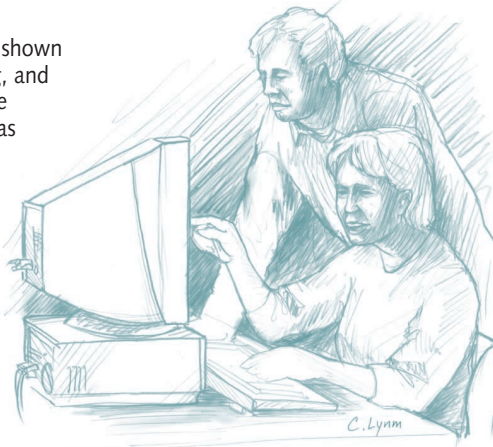
LOOKING FOR QUALITY

High-quality Internet sources are:

- Unbiased—the group providing the information should not have a vested interest (like selling a product) in slanting the information a certain way
- Staffed by recognized experts in the field—such as a government agency, professional medical society, or health organization

Other signs of quality:

- Funding and sponsorship are clearly shown
- Timeliness—date of posting, revising, and updating are clear and easy to locate
- Information about the source (such as a mission statement of the group providing the information) is clear and easy to find
- Authors or contributors to articles on the site are clearly identified
- References and sources for information are listed at the end of articles
- Experts have reviewed content for accuracy and completeness



Additional Sources: National Institutes of Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Family Physicians

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ACCESS TO MEDICAL INFORMATION

The Internet is a convenient source for medical information, but it is not your only source. There are many resources with medical information at most local public libraries. Another good source for more technical information is a medical library (a library that specializes in medical resources). The staff at your public library may be able to help you locate a medical library near you that is open to the public. Public libraries also often provide computers that access the Internet.

GETTING STARTED

The following sites are good places to start searching for information on a medical condition:

MEDLINEplus

www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus

National Library of Medicine's Web site providing health information for the public

healthfinder

www.healthfinder.gov

Easy access to health information from various government and not-for-profit organizations developed by the US Department of Health and Human Services

Medem

www.medem.com

Health care information from several medical societies, including the AMA

INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page Index on *JAMA*'s Web site at www.jama.com. A previous JAMA Patient Page on health and the Internet was published October 21, 1998.

