

FINDING REPUTABLE ONLINE HEALTH INFORMATION

The Internet has changed the ways that people get information. In the online community, user discussion groups are a primary channel for exchanging information. People swap stories about all sorts of things—from their favorite misheard lyric to how much they hate the company they work for. These ‘Net-lovers look to each other for help in finding the information they want—often before turning to “sanctioned” sources.

On the Web, everyone’s a publisher . . .

Almost everyone with Web access can create a vanity page, tell their story, and share success or woes, with anyone who will visit/read. More and more often, these sites include an area for visitors to tell their stories, helping the online community and “information chain” grow.

Nowhere is this human connectivity more evident than at Internet health sites.

Now, there’s nothing wrong with sharing information, especially when it’s based on experience. In fact, you can gain a great deal of insight and find comfort from connecting with someone who has the same medical condition as you or as a loved one. And you just might learn some helpful tips.

However, having a disease—or knowing someone who has—doesn’t make you an expert anymore than playing a doctor on television makes you one.

So, take to heart the old adage “caveat emptor,” let the buyer beware. Approach Web sites about medical conditions with caution.

Among the reputable sites are those created by “activists” who want to tell their stories and sites created by people who want you to buy their product. Approach any Web site about a medical condition with skepticism. Follow these tips to separate the wheat from the chaff:

- Look for a posting and a revision date. As you know, medical science strives to make advances every day. If a site you visit is old or hasn’t been updated recently, the information may not be helpful.
- Find out who owns the site and their point-of-view.
- Find out whether the site links to the sale of a specific product.
- Visit QuackWatch (www.quackwatch.com) to see whether anything has been reported about the site or the subject.

Sites you can trust

On the Web, you can find trustworthy health information. Here are some sites that might help you on your way:

- **PDR.net**—the online version of the popular “Physician’s Desk Reference.” This site includes information for consumers as well as physicians and pharmacists. (www.pdr.net)
- **InteliHealth**—Backed by the Harvard Medical School, this comprehensive site includes news, “cool tools,” and drug search capabilities. The site also features

the Symptom Scout, which helps you narrow possible health conditions based on online responses and gives tips for taking control of your health.

(www.intelihealth.com)

- **The National Institute for Health’s Health Information** site provides a compendium of sources for clinical trials, health hotlines, and other credible health information. Check out MEDLINEplus, a source dedicated to finding quality health information at sites across the country. (www.nih.gov/health)
- **Center Watch** is the place to find out about clinical trials across the United States. The site includes information about clinical research, a trial notification service, and the latest news about clinical trials. (www.centerwatch.com)
- **Kidshealth** is really three sites in one—it has special areas for parents, kids, and teens! Each area includes articles ranging from emotional matters to health and fitness to preventive medicine. At kidshealth, there really is something for everyone. (www.kidshealth.com)
- **The Mental Help Net** is the “award-winning guide to mental health, psychology and psychiatry online” and includes recent articles on a range of mental health topics, access to free self-help books, and online reference resources. From this site, you can learn more about such common mental health concerns as depression, ADD, and sleeping disorders, among others. (www.mentalhelp.net)