

## Are your searches on the Internet turning up *reliable* health advice? Watch for these 10 red flags of bad information

- 1. Sensationalized content** Is the information on the site presented in an alarmist tone? Is it loaded with scary stories and extreme outcomes? Are the issues presented in terms of black and white, with no shades of gray? If the answer to any of these questions is “Yes,” the author may have an axe to grind or a hidden leaning. Suspect the accuracy of the information you obtain!
- 2. No date** This may seem like a minor problem, but the world of health care moves swiftly. Treatments and approaches that are reliable one day can be discredited in the blink of an eye. If the site does not date its content, or indicate when it was last updated, you have no way of knowing how current it is. Move on!
- 3. No author credentials** The author or authors of material on the Web site should clearly, and visibly, present their credentials—that is, their education and training, their title, and where they work. If they do not, it is impossible to judge their expertise—in fact, expertise may be lacking.
- 4. Buzz words** The use of quasi-scientific buzz words such as “toxins,” “heavy metals,” and “detoxification” should draw your attention. These words have no meaning, so they should lead to you question what else on the site might be fiction.
- 5. Patient testimonials** Three people may have improved with a particular drug, but what about those who haven’t? Using unverified personal experiences is a sign of advertising, not good medicine.
- 6. For sale sign** If you can’t easily tell the difference between the medical content and products for sale, move along. Even when products don’t appear prominently, chances are that the bottom line of the Web site is profit, not education.
- 7. All benefits and no risks** Sites that have a stake in a particular treatment—be it monetary, emotional, or some other involvement—usually provide a lot of information on benefits but not so much about risks. Every treatment has risks.
- 8. No sources** When physicians scrutinize an article or study, they make it a point to check the list of sources at the end, to ensure that it contains legitimate information, such as reports from a medical journal or government publication. A Web site that presents detailed medical information without providing links to the references or comparable detail about the sources of that information is highly suspect.
- 9. Conflict of interest** Most reputable health sites not only provide information from experts, they list any so-called potential conflicts of interest that those experts may have. For example, if a medication made by XYZ Pharmaceuticals is recommended by Dr. Smith, who is also a consultant to XYZ, you should know. Articles and presentations at scientific meetings require these disclosures for a reason: Financial ties can produce bias.
- 10. The Web site or product is listed on QuackWatch**  
This Web site is dedicated to exposing unproven and scientifically questionable medical claims (<http://www.quackwatch.com>).

### Where can you turn for help?

- An excellent starting place is the National Medical Library Web site at <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/resources/userguide.html>, which provides resources for obtaining reliable health information.
- The National Library of Medicine and National Institutes of Health also provide an outstanding 16-minute lesson on how you can evaluate online health information. Find it at <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/webeval/webeval.html>.
- [healthfinder.gov](http://healthfinder.gov) is a Web “encyclopedia” offering entries on more than 1,600 health topics.