

Some Tips and Tricks on Surfing the Web for Health Care Information - *What You Should Know*

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Are you one of the 60% of Canadian Internet users searching the web for health related information? With over 15,000 different health web sites to choose from the task can be overwhelming and intimidating. Health information should be based on fact and evidence. Traditionally this information has come from health care professionals who are experienced and knowledgeable in their specialized areas. Web sites often claim to provide content based on expert advice, but what does this really mean? It is critical that the health web surfer be sure that the web site content is safe, reliable and trustworthy. If you are travelling through the virtual maze of health information it is important to make sure you are getting comprehensive and accurate sources. Following some simple guidelines will help you determine which web sites are legitimate and which are not. A healthy surfer is a happy surfer.

SPONSORSHIP

Who sponsors the site? Does a non-profit organization committed to information sharing maintain the site or is the site owner trying to sell you a product? You can determine this by looking at the site disclaimers, clicking in to the link which tells you who they are, and doing some snooping into who the contributors are. If this information is not apparent, be suspicious. Look at the domain of the web site to provide you with additional information .com (commercial), .edu (educational), .org (organization).



CREDIBILITY

Ask yourself is this source of information credible? Organizations like Health Canada or the National Institutes of Health in the United States have to be accurate in the information they provide because they have accountability to the public. An unknown expert in the field does not have the same burden of responsibility.

VERIFICATION

Are you able to verify the information on another web site, in a medical book or a peer-reviewed journal? A second opinion can never hurt.

CURRENCY



Is the site up to date with a "last updated" note on each web page? If not, you can find this out via your Browser. In Netscape hold down the CTRL-I key and you will get a "date last modified" statement. In Internet Explorer, simply pull down File and select properties to get update information. Remember you have to be on the web site page when performing these checks.

THE HON CODE

This code is another indicator on whether a site is “trustworthy”. The system was developed by the Health on the Net Foundation and it requires that each signatory guarantee to abide by the following rules:

- Trained professionals provide the medical and health advice on the site, or if not the information is clearly identified as such
- Information supports, rather than replaces the relationship with the user’s medical team
- User data on the site remains confidential. Information and claim are supported by references to source data, with HTML links if possible
- The date the page was last updated is clear
- Information provided is clear
- Contact addresses are made available
- Commercial, non-commercial and advertising on the site is easily identified
- The site’s advertising policy is shown on the site



Last but certainly not least, there is a site on the Web, which provides insight to consumers on questionable medical procedures. Quackwatch is put up by Dr. Stephen Barrett, a medical doctor who has authored several books on fraudulent health activities. To check out this site go to www.quackwatch.com.

For **more information** on **Surfing Tips** see the following resource guides:

- ◆ National Cancer Institute's "*10 Things to Know about Evaluating Medical Resources on the Web*"

See the National Cancer Institute's website at [www.cancer.gov/cancer information](http://www.cancer.gov/cancer_information), look under "Resources" and then go to "Links to Other Sites" to find the article.

- ◆ The Canadian Health Network's feature "*Health Information on the Internet*" at <http://www.canadian-health-network.ca/html/help/netinfoe.html>.

The section includes information on "How to find the most trustworthy health information Web sites" and "What to look for in a health promoting Web site".

- ◆ The Health on the Net Foundation website at www.hon.ch and the HON Code principles (in 19 languages) at

<http://www.hon.ch/HONcode/Conduct.html>.

