

Judge: Web Sites for Health. Consumer Guidelines

**To help health consumers make informed choices about Web sites.
Based on the views of health consumers and support groups.**

Summary of "How to judge the quality of a Web site"

These guidelines aim to help health consumers make informed decisions about Web sites. This leaflet summarises the things to look for that will help you judge if a Web site is of good quality.

- **Trust and reputation**

Look for sites of trustworthy organisations with a good reputation, e.g. well-known, reputable organisations; organisations you already know and trust; sites recommended by a health professional or a support group.

- **Who produced the site**

Find out which organisation or individual has produced the site, e.g. professional organisations, support groups, government departments, commercial organisations, individuals.

- **Purpose of the site**

Find out the purpose of the site, e.g. its aims or mission, its audience, how the site was developed and if health consumers were involved.

- **Funding sources**

Find out where the site gets its funding from, e.g. financial accounts, names of sponsors, the types of adverts on the site.

- **Date**

Look for the date when the site was last updated or reviewed. Information on the site should also be dated, with an update / review date given.

- **How the information is written**

Look at how the information is written, e.g. discussing different sides of an issue; not sensational or extreme; with correct grammar and spelling; simply written and easy to understand if aimed at health consumers; in other languages if aimed at non-English speakers.

- **Descriptions of conditions and treatments**

Look for the following details that indicate that the information is likely to be reliable, e.g. the name of the author, their job title, place of work, qualifications, potential conflicts of interest; the date the information was written, with an update or review date; the sources of information the author used; the author's contact details; links to related resources; descriptions of quality checks or editorial processes.

Detailed assessment of the correctness of medical information requires help from a health professional or a lay-expert. A lay-expert is a member of the public who has spent a lot of time reading and learning about a specific medical condition.

- **Medical research**

Medical research literature is very complex and needs specialised knowledge to understand it fully. Support groups often explain about research on their Web sites or in their newsletters.

- **Personal experiences**

Personal experiences of patients and their carers are important sources of information. Check that they are clearly marked as personal experiences. Be cautious about individual patient or carer sites. Check the medical information they give carefully.

- **Foreign sites**

Find out the country of origin of the site. Health information on non-UK sites can be different to that provided on UK sites, e.g. different health systems and cultural practices, use of different terminology, recommending different treatments, different availability of treatments and drugs.

- **Communication**

Look for ways you can contact the organisation to discuss issues, ask for advice or comment on the site, e.g. an e-mail address, a postal address, a phone number, electronic forms.

- **Links**

Assess links to other Web sites too. The site should explain why and how they have chosen these links. It should be made clear that you are linking to another site.

- **Disclaimers**

Look at the site's terms and conditions and disclaimers. These should cover issues such as, medical information, privacy, copyright, responsibilities for accuracy of information and for any harm caused by using the site.

- **Kitemarks**

Kitemarks are signs or logos indicating that the site has been 'endorsed' in some way by another organisation. They do not necessarily mean that the health information is correct. The absence of a kitemark is not a sign of poor quality. Only a minority of sites apply for them.

- **Design**

Look at how well the site is designed, e.g. personal information should be kept private and secure; the site should be easy to use; the site should be easy to access; adverts should be clearly marked as such, and discrete; the site should have an attractive appearance, without the need to use extra software.

- **Interactive facilities, e.g. e-mail lists, bulletin boards, chat rooms**

Assess the quality of interactive facilities too. Look for the presence of experienced members; requirement for rules of polite, supportive behaviour; presence of people ensuring the rules are followed; requirement to register to use the facility.

These guidelines were produced by Contact a Family, Northumbria University and the Centre for Health Information Quality, through a project supported by the Health Foundation. Author: Sue Childs, Research Fellow, School of Computing, Engineering and Information Sciences, Northumbria University. Published February 2003. Last updated December 12009. Review date December 2010.