

Evaluating Information on the Web

Are you confused by the amount of information on immunizations on the Internet? Concerned about the rumors linking vaccines and diseases like diabetes and autism? Below are some tips to help you navigate your way through all of the information available and determine its accuracy.

How do I know if the vaccine information I find on the Internet is accurate?

First, consider the source of information.

- A good health Web site will display who is responsible for the site. Also, there will be a way to contact the information provider or Webmaster.
- Information should not be slanted in favor of a Web site's sponsor or source of funding. Health information should be accurate and unbiased.

Then, ask the following questions:

- Do scientific experts review the medical information before it is posted on the Web site? What are their credentials?
- Does the information display the date of last revision, and is it kept up to date?
- What is the scientific evidence for claims made? The original source of facts and figures should be shown. For example, the Web site should provide citations of medical articles or other sources of information. You should be able to distinguish facts from opinions. Also, facts are more reliable if they come from a published scientific study on humans rather than from unpublished accounts or from reports of a single person or of animal studies.

Next, consider the purpose of the Web site. The purpose should be to provide accurate and unbiased information about that topic. If the purpose is to advertise about a health care product, be skeptical about the information provided.

Finally, discuss with your doctor or health professional the information that you find on the Web. Health information found on the Web should supplement rather than replace the information or advice given by your doctor.

The Federal Trade Commission, an agency of the U.S. federal government, encourages consumers to carefully consider information they find on the Web. The agency has compiled the following list of typical phrases used by some Web sites to deceive consumers:

- The product is a quick cure-all for a wide range of medical problems.
- The product is described as a "scientific breakthrough," "miraculous cure," "exclusive product," "secret ingredient," or "ancient remedy."
- The product is claimed to have been suppressed by a conspiracy of the government, the medical profession, or research scientists.
- Case histories are not documented.
- The product is said to be available from a single source or for a limited time.
- The description uses medical lingo to hide the fact it lacks good science.

Is there any regulation or standardization of information on the Internet?

The Federal Trade Commission

The law enforcement efforts of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) focus on deceptive and unproven claims. The federal agency monitors the Web for fraud and deception, and it can act against a company if it sees a pattern of law violations. To help make consumers aware of Web sites that promote fraudulent products, the FTC launched the campaign "Operation Cure.All" in June 1999. The Web site for the FTC is www.ftc.gov.

Healthfinder

The Healthfinder Web site (www.healthfinder.gov) is the federal government's gateway for reliable information from U.S. government agencies and other organizations. The site displays selected resources of consumer health and human services information. These sources have been reviewed and found reliable and credible.

The Health on the Net Foundation

More than 2,800 medical and health Web sites are members of The Health On the Net Foundation's HONcode (www.hon.ch/HONcode/), a not-for-profit organization that has attempted to standardize the reliability of information on the Web. Member sites agree to present information according to basic ethical standards and provide readers with the source and purpose of the data presented on the Web site.

Sources

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- National Network for Immunization Information