



Getting Trustworthy Health Information from the Internet

People with multiple sclerosis (MS) or their friends and family members often use the Internet to find health information but may experience difficulties in finding information that they can trust. The information below aims to answer frequently asked questions and provide tips on how to identify trustworthy health information on the Internet.

It is important to evaluate what you find on the Internet because:

- Anyone can post information on the Internet.
- Search engines results are selected by computer software and not by human experts.
- Websites may be sponsored by companies that are selling products so may not provide objective information.

What are people with MS saying about using the Internet to find health information?

One study found that 97% of people with MS surveyed went online before their initial doctor visit. People with MS use the Internet in order to:

- Research general information
- Check on the quality of a physician

- Find support groups of others with MS
- Find physician who specializes in MS
- To be informed to save time during a health care visit

People with MS in this study were unsure of their ability to:

- Debunk hoaxes and identify treatment fads
- Detect hidden agendas on websites
- Understand medical jargon

They also reported being cautious when using the Internet because:

- Finding information can be difficult
- Information may be frightening

For these reasons above, people with MS may prefer to let their health care providers filter the information they find on the Internet.

Tips to finding health information that you can trust

Is the source of information respected and credible?

- Look at the web address (also called URL) to see what type of organization is sponsoring the website.

- Websites sponsored by government, educational institutions, or credible professional organizations like the National MS Society are more likely to provide unbiased information than commercial websites.
 - ◆ .gov = U.S. government
 - ◆ .edu = educational institution
 - ◆ .org = professional or non-profit organization
 - ◆ .com = commercial website
- Avoid websites that are someone's personal website.
- If there is an 'About Us' link, review the purpose of the organization. If the purpose is to promote commercial products or services, the health information provided may not be trustworthy.
- Be cautious of information presented if there are advertisements on websites. If there are ads they should be separate from health information.
- Is there contact information for the organization such as an email or phone number so you can contact them to learn more about their organization or website information?
- Be careful with links. If a link on a trusted website directs you to an entirely new website, do not assume that this new website also has trustworthy information. You will need to evaluate the new website to ensure it is trustworthy.

Is the information up-to-date?

- Look for the phrase 'last updated' on the webpages to see if the pages are current. If there is no indication of when the information was last updated then do not assume it is current.
- Look for other indications that the website is not up to date such as outdated events page or outdated news under 'Latest news' feed.
- If links on the website do not work, the website may be outdated.

Is the information presented based on facts (evidence)?

- Does it sound too good to be true? Be skeptical of health information that contains claims of a 'miracle cure'.
- Look for indications that the information on the webpage is based on research or expert review and not just opinion.
 - ◆ Are research articles or other original sources of information cited?
 - ◆ Is there a clear statement of where the information presented comes from or how it is reviewed?
- Compare credible websites. Compare the info you find on one credible website with information on other websites to see if it is consistent.
- Verify health claims that are based on personal testimony through

multiple credible sources. Online support groups, forums or blogs are a great way to share experiences and information but should not be considered a trusted source of health and medical advice.

- Evaluate the strength of the health claims presented. For example, a health claim based on one small study is not as strong as a health claim based on the findings of multiple large scale studies. To learn more about evaluating the level of evidence go to, <http://consumers.cochrane.org/levels-evidence>.

How to avoid scams and viruses

- Be careful if the website asked that you register or sign up to access information on the website, or receive information or other free products in the mail.
- Review the privacy policy to make sure the website will not share your information with a third party.
- Avoid websites that have pop-ups.
- Do not download files from a website unless you know the documents are trustworthy.

Tips for using search engines such as Google or Yahoo

- Combine terms in order to focus your search. For example, if you want to find information on dealing with pain for people with MS, enter *pain AND multiple sclerosis*.

- Use double quotes to find an exact phrase (“assistive technology”).
- Use OR to search for both words or phrases (exercise OR “physical activity”).

Tips for sharing Internet information with your health care providers

Research shows that most doctors (80%) see patients who have gotten health information from the Internet.

The tips below will help you make the most out of your time with your health care provider.

- Share only health information that comes from multiple and credible websites.
- Don’t share complete documents but make a brief bulleted list of your questions.
- Ask your doctor to suggest some websites that might be useful to you.

A few trustworthy websites to get you started

National MS Society - <http://www.nationalmssociety.org>

MS Association of America - <http://www.msassociation.org/>

MedlinePlus, National Library of Medicine - <http://www.medlineplus.gov>

Healthfinder, US Department of Health and Human Services – <http://www.healthfinder.gov>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, US Department of Health and Human Services - <http://www.cdc.gov>

Mayo Clinic - <http://www.mayoclinic.com>

WebMD - <http://www.webmd.com/>

Resources

Evaluating Internet Health Information: A Tutorial from the National Library of Medicine. http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/webeval/webeval_start.html

Evaluation Health Information. MedLine Plus, National Library of Medicine. <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/evaluatinghealthinformation.html>

“Top Ten” Most Useful Consumer Health websites. Medical Library Association. <http://www.mlanet.org/resources/userguide#5>

References

Hay MC, Strathmann C, Lieber E, Wick K, Giesser B. (2008). Why patients go online: multiple sclerosis, the Internet, and physician-patient communication. *Neurologist*, 14(6): 374-81.

Literature review on health information-seeking behavior on the web: a health consumer and health professional perspective, European Center for Disease Prevention and Control, http://ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications/Publications/Forms/ECDC_DisForm.aspx?ID=753

The Social Life of Health Information. (2011). The Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project, Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Social-Life-of-Health-Info.aspx>

Authorship

Content is based on research evidence and/or professional consensus of faculty at the University of Washington Multiple Sclerosis Rehabilitation Research and Training Center. This factsheet may be reproduced and distributed freely with the following attribution: Yorkston, K. (2012). *Getting Trustworthy Information from the Internet [Factsheet]. Multiple Sclerosis Rehabilitation Research and Training Center. NIDRR/U.S. D.O.E. grant #H133B080025. University of Washington. <http://msrrtc.washington.edu/>*

Disclaimer

This information is not meant to replace the advice from a medical professional. You should consult your health care provider regarding specific medical concerns or treatment.