How to tell a good medical web site from a bad one?

The Internet can be a valuable tool to help you learn about your health, but ANYONE can set up a web page to say ANYTHING, so be careful. Used wisely, the Internet can help you be an informed patient who can partner with your health professionals to keep you well.

**Authority**--who offers the information on the web site? A medically qualified individual? A responsible organization (American Academy of Pediatrics, Children’s Mercy Hospitals & Clinics)? Trusting the information on a web site depends partly on trusting the information provider. In the case of certain rare disorders, the only web site with much information for families may be produced by parents of an affected child. These sites may be very helpful, but check with your doctor about any medical information they have.

**Disclaimer**--does the site clearly state that its information should not take the place of the doctor/patient relationship? Does it offer general information for you to talk over with your doctor or does it offer medical advice for your treatment without ever having met you or examined you?

**Content**--how much information does the web site offer? Is it easy to read and understand? Is it accurate? Do the graphics (pictures, drawings) add to the information, do they confuse the information, or do they just decorate the page? Is the web site well-organized and easy to navigate? When following links, can you tell when you are still in the same web site and when you are in a new web site? Ask yourself also about specific medical claims (“a recent study says”—what study, published where?) and if they are justified (does credible data back up the claim?).

**Date**--how current is the information? Is it clear when each page has been updated? Do the links still work?

**Purpose/Bias**--what is the purpose of the web site? To share information among affected families? To educate the public? To sell a product? Does the site have a particular point of view, and if so, what motivates that point of view?

**Is sponsorship transparent?** Especially in the case of commercial (.com) sites, it is important to know who sponsors the site. What is the sponsor’s influence on the content?

**Codes of Ethics**
The Health on the Net Foundation allows a web site to display its logo if the site follows the HON Code of Conduct (www.hon.ch/HONcode/Conduct.html). Participation is voluntary, and many excellent sites do not register with this Foundation (www.aap.org, for example). If
you see the HON logo, does the web site really follow the HON Code, or was the logo just cut and pasted into the page? Click on the logo to verify compliance. The URAC logo ([www.urac.org](http://www.urac.org)) works the same way. Click on it to verify a web site's compliance with HI-Ethics ([Health Internet Ethics, http://www.hi-ethics.org/urac.asp](http://www.hi-ethics.org/urac.asp)).

Ask the Doctor web sites
There are a number of "Ask the doctor" sites on the Internet; a good example is Med Help International ([www.medhelp.org](http://www.medhelp.org)). It has always subscribed to the HON Code, and has well-qualified physicians to answer questions in each of its forums. Be aware that some quacks offer medical advice, referring to themselves as "Doctor" without disclosing that their "doctorate" is from a diploma mill, or that they are doctors of veterinary medicine! Even licensed physicians can give poor advice to a patient they have never examined; any suggestions or information from "ask the doctor" web sites should be discussed with your own doctor. If you are unhappy with your physician’s abilities, change to another physician or get a second opinion from a doctor who examines you. Whenever using an "ask the doctor" site, be aware of its policy on patient privacy, which should be clearly stated.

How to recognize a quackery site?
This used to be easy. "Quack" sites had poor grammar and spelling, lots of capitalized words and exclamation marks (!), and wild claims featuring the words SECRET or MIRACLE or CURE. Quacks said that the "medical establishment" or "your doctor" wouldn't want you to know the information in the web site. Quack sites have become more sophisticated, with glossy graphics, distorted (or invented) research "data" persuasively justifying claims, and heart-tugging stories. See "Signs of a 'quacky' web site" by Stephen Barrett, M.D. at [www.quackwatch.com](http://www.quackwatch.com) or read about suspicious health claims at Quackwatch or at the National Council for Reliable Health Information ([www.ncahf.org](http://www.ncahf.org)).

Communicate with your health professional
Always discuss therapies you learn about on the Internet with your doctor, including dietary changes, herbal remedies, exercise programs, therapeutic devices, vitamin and mineral supplements, and other treatments. Just as pineapple juice can interact with some medications, you may have complications from the use of some therapies recommended on the Internet. Your doctor knows your individual case and can tell how the information applies to you. It is also important not to stop your doctor's treatment plan based on what you learn on the Internet, without talking to your doctor first.

Some suggested places to start
[MedlinePlus](http://medlineplus.gov) (Health Topics, drug information, medical encyclopedia, interactive tutorials, health checkup tools, etc., searchable in English or Spanish)

[KidsHealth](http://www.kidshealth.org) (information for kids, teens, parents, some Spanish)


[Family Village](http://www.familyvillage.wisc.edu/) (disabilities, either inborn or acquired)

[Cancer.gov](http://cancer.gov/) (National Cancer Institute, in English or Spanish)

[WebMDHealth](http://my.webmd.com/webmd_today/home/default) (a commercial site with clearly stated editorial, advertising, and privacy policies, optional registration)