



HOW TO KNOW IF A WEBSITE IS ACCURATE AND RELIABLE

Guide to Using Health Information on the Internet



Many parents use the Internet to search for information about their child's health. The Internet contains a wealth of knowledge, instructions and advice from health professionals and other parents. Remember, anyone can post information on the Internet whether it is true or not, so not every website is useful or trustworthy.



THIS DOCUMENT WAS CREATED THROUGH A JOINT PROJECT BETWEEN THE MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH/DIVISION FOR CHILDREN & YOUTH WITH SPECIAL HEALTH NEEDS AND THE HARVARD SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH MATERNAL & CHILD HEALTH/CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES PROGRAM. SPECIAL THANKS TO ALL THE FAMILIES WHO CONTRIBUTED THEIR IDEAS AND EXPERTISE TO THIS DOCUMENT.



Following are guidelines and tips that you can use to evaluate websites to learn more about your child's condition or special needs. While not every website will meet all of the guidelines, we hope that the checklist will help you determine which websites are best for getting information. Always consult a health care provider before making decisions about your child's health. Here are some things to consider:

1. Is the institution or author **credible**?
2. Is the website **objective**?
3. Is information **up-to-date**?
4. Is the website **secure**?
5. Is there website **support**?

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Is the institution or author credible?

■ Is the author listed?

The best websites will identify the author and even provide their contact information, indicating that they are accountable for the information they post.

■ What are the author's credentials?

Is the author a doctor or other health professional or a science writer? If you are unsure about their credential claims, you can do a Google search with their name to try to verify the information.

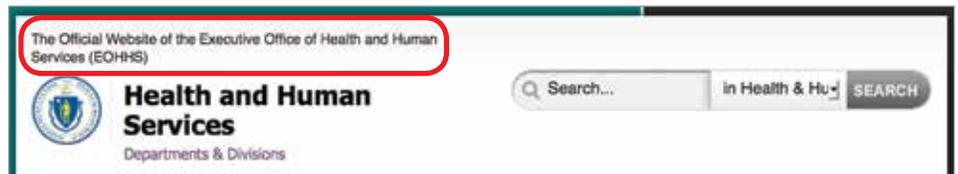
■ Is the content well written?

Spelling errors, poor grammar, and numerous links that do not work may indicate questionable credibility and professionalism.

■ Who sponsors and operates the website?

Look under the About Us section to see who owns the site and the reasons for creating it. Is the website run by a trustworthy organization, such as a known hospital, university or state or federal government? In general, reputable organizations will be concerned with providing accurate, unbiased information.

Example:



■ **Is it a trusted business?**

If the website is selling products, you can look it up on the Better Business Bureau: www.bbb.org

■ **What is the domain name extension?**

Web addresses ending in .org, .edu, or .gov are more likely to contain unbiased, factual information.

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Is the website objective?

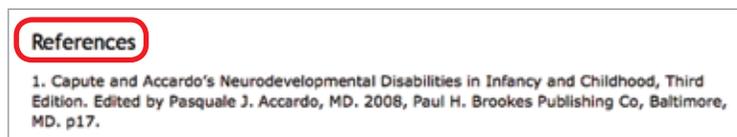
■ **Is the information factual?**

Information should be presented in a clear, unbiased manner. If opinions are included, the source should be a qualified professional or organization.

■ **Does it reference the original source of the scientific information?**

Reliable websites acknowledge their sources. If you have any questions about where the information came from, you should be able to contact someone on the site to obtain references.

Example:



■ **Does the website have limited or no advertising?**

Most websites have some advertising, but the people who pay for the ads should not influence the content of the site. Look for funding disclosures.

■ **Does the website make realistic promises?**

Be wary of websites that say they have a “miracle cure” or urge you to buy a product, send money, or choose a specific treatment.

3

■ **Is the information widely accepted?**

If many other websites criticize or question a piece of information, or you cannot find such information on any other websites, it may not be reliable. However, even if something is widely accepted, there is no guarantee that it is trustworthy. Always consult a health care provider before making decisions about your child's health.

Is information up-to-date?

■ **Is the date listed?**

Look for a Last "Updated" "Modified" or "Reviewed" date, "Creation date", or "Copyright date", usually at the bottom of a web page.

Example:



■ **Has the website been updated recently?**

Health information changes frequently. When a website is updated frequently, information is more likely to be accurate and well monitored. Consult your health care provider for guidance on how rapidly information for specific conditions changes and what is considered out-of-date.

4

Is the website secure?

■ **Does the website request medical information?**

Be wary of a website that acts like a medical provider and wants information about the details of your child's condition. Only a certified medical provider such as a doctor or nurse may ask this information.

■ **Does the website request your personal data?**

You should never feel obligated to give out your name, e-mail address, telephone number, or other personal information if you do not want to. Never give out your social security number or bank account number. If a website requires sign-up or payment to access content, ask around and read the fine print beforehand.

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■ Does the website contain secure certifications?

If you are purchasing something on a website, such as durable medical equipment, look for indications that a website has been verified as secure:

- URL includes “https” instead of “http”
- A small lock icon appears next to the website’s URL
- Sometimes there is a VeriSign checkmark (see www.trustthecheck.com for more information)

Is there website support?

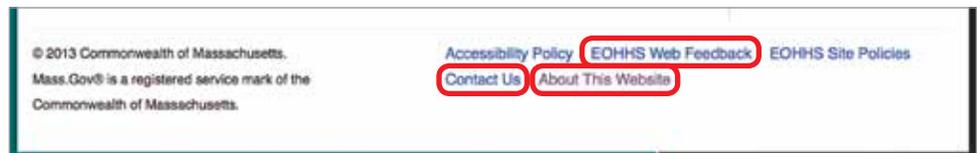
■ Are there help or troubleshooting resources?

Look for a help section with names, professional credentials and affiliations, email addresses, phone numbers and other contact information.

■ Is there contact information for the site?

If you have any questions about the information on a site, you should feel free to reach out to the authors or Webmaster.

Example:





Helpful Tips

- Try asking your health care provider for recommendations of good websites. Always **talk to your child's doctor** about the information you find on the Internet, especially if it involves any changes in your child's regimen or treatment.
- Blogs, Facebook, discussion boards, and other social media created by families can be great resources for objective health information, sharing experiences, and emotional support. Keep in mind, though, that **every family's experience is different**. What works for some families may not work for yours. The criteria regarding website credibility and objectivity listed above also apply to social media. Take note of how the site is moderated, how newcomers are welcomed, and if someone seems to have an agenda or is biased.
- Community resources can assist you in evaluating the accuracy of information on the Internet. Some hospitals and academic medical centers have libraries that provide services for the public; **health science librarians** can assist consumers in searching the web. To locate a medical library in your area, visit <http://nnlm.gov/members/adv.html>.
- Consider using **Site Map** (usually appears as a link at the very bottom or top of a web page) to see the website in a table-of-contents format.
- Search engines like Google (www.google.ca/advanced_search) and Yahoo (<http://search.yahoo.com/web/advanced>) usually have **Advanced Search** capability. This allows you to narrow your search to a specific region, domain name extensions, and/or exact phrases, for example. Google Scholar (<http://scholar.google.com>) searches for scientific publications and is a good way to find referenced research studies.
- The following websites contain **more guidance** on how to find trustworthy health information:
www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/webeval/webeval.html
www.mlanet.org/resources/userguide.html
www.minnesotahhealthinfo.org/tips.html
www.hon.ch/pat.html
www.healthfinder.gov

