City of Albuquerque Health Tips

Health information on the internet: A checklist to help you judge which websites to trust

This document is part of a series of information resources provided by Aligning Forces For Quality (AF4Q) to help you get good quality health care. For more resources, visit the HR/Employee Benefits section of the City's website

When you need health information, websites can be a wonderful resource. Many websites offer reliable, accurate health information for consumers that is backed up by solid medical research. You can trust the information you get from these websites.

Unfortunately, the health information on some websites is <u>not</u> reliable or accurate. **The internet is not regulated.** This means that people can create websites with health information and say whatever they like. To find health information that is trustworthy, you must pick your websites carefully.

Features you should look for

To evaluate a website, start by looking for the features that are listed below. When you find these features, you can feel more confident about trusting the website.

> ✓ Does the website tell who is responsible for the site?
> Does it tell how you can contact the site?

To find out who is responsible for the site, look for links on the home page that say *about us, about this site,* or *contact us.* Check the bottom of the home page for a copyright notice. Look for other links with names such as *our sponsors, privacy policy*, or *editorial board.* If you can't find out who runs the site, you should be suspicious.

A website should make it easy for you to get in touch with the webmaster or the organization that sponsors the website. It should give a phone number, email address, or other contact information.

> ✓ Is the website's <u>only</u> purpose to give you information (and not to sell you something)?

To find the most trustworthy health information, look for websites run by non-profit educational or medical organizations or government agencies. Usually, these types of sites have the one and only purpose of providing information. You can often tell these sites by the ending of their name:

> *.gov* **for government**
>
> *.edu* **for educational institutions**
>
> *.org* **for non-profit organizations** such as medical foundations and medical associations

Be cautious about using health information from websites that sell products or services. You can often tell these sites by the ending of their name:

> *.com* **for commercial**

Some commercial sites provide trustworthy information. Other commercial websites focus mainly on information that supports what they are selling, and the health information they give can be misleading or false.

> ✓ If the website asks you for information about yourself, does it tell why and explain exactly what it will do with your personal information?

Sometimes websites want you to give out information about yourself. Some websites have strict safeguards to protect your information but others do not. Some websites even sell your personal information to other organizations.

Before you give out any personal information, **find the website's privacy policy.** Usually there is a link for it on the home page, often at the bottom. Read the privacy policy carefully and **decide whether it gives you the protection you want**. If you have any doubts or concerns, do not give out any personal information to the website.

> ✓ Is the health information on the website based on results from medical research? Is it backed up with references to research studies?

The most trustworthy health information is based on medical research. Evidence from research studies on patient care tells which types of health care work best for particular health conditions.

Look for health information that discusses the results from medical research. There should be references to articles in medical journals or other sources to back it up.

Learn more

Look for these tip sheets at the employee website (employees.com/healthinfo):

- "Know what works best" – What types of health care work best?

- "Good quality health care" - Information about health care quality: what it is and where to find it.

✔ Does the website give the source of the health information? Does it tell whether the information has been reviewed and approved by medical experts?

Sometimes websites have health information that has been written specifically for the website. Other times, the information comes from a different source. The website should always identify the information source. If you are not able to tell where the information comes from, be cautious about using it.

A website should say something about the people who wrote the health information it offers. You can feel more confident about trusting the information if you know it was written by well-qualified health professionals.

Before health information is put on a website, it should be checked carefully to be sure it is accurate and up-to-date. Ideally, the information should be reviewed and approved by medical experts before it is put on the website. Look for descriptions on the home page or links to *advisory board*, *editorial board*, *reviewers*, or *review policies.*

Some websites give information that compares the quality of care provided by hospitals, nursing homes, medical groups, or other health care providers. These websites should explain where the information comes from, what it means, and how it is checked for accuracy.

✔ Does the health information seem unbiased, objective, and balanced? Is it written in a professional manner using simple language?

When you find health information on a website, it should be easy for you to tell which parts of the information are based on solid medical evidence and which are opinions.

You can feel more confident about using health information when it includes and discusses different points of view, mentions limitations of the information, and gives cautions about its use. When opinions are given, they should be backed up with reasons. Be very careful about using information that seems biased, too subjective, or imbalanced, such as information that seems to push a particular point of view.

Health information for consumers should sound professional and be easy to understand. Terms that are unfamiliar or technical should be clearly explained. When information is poorly written or too complicated, it is easy to misinterpret.

✓ **Is the health information up to date? Is there a regular review and update of the site?**

A website should include dates that tell you when the health information was prepared and when the site has been reviewed and updated.

✓ **Overall, does the health information seem reasonable and believable?**

Trust your instincts about the health information you find on websites. If it doesn't seem reasonable and believable, then don't use it.

When you see your doctor or other health professionals, you can talk about the health information you have found on websites. You may want to take a copy with you to your medical visit and ask questions about it.

Four good websites to start an internet search

The four government websites listed below have information that is reliable and up-to-date. Each of these websites has links that will lead you to many other websites that also provide trustworthy health information.

www.medlineplus.gov

Run by the National Library of Medicine, this website includes a medical encyclopedia and detailed information on medical conditions, prescription drugs, and other herbs and supplements. This site gives you access to *Medline*, which has publications and summaries from all major medical journals published in the English language.

www.cdc.gov

This consumer-friendly website is run by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (the CDC). It includes information on hundreds of diseases and health conditions, including conditions that are common at different stages of life, or for specific groups of people. It has health-related information and advice for international travelers.

www.healthfinder.gov

Health Finder is run by the U.S. Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. It includes an on-line health library that tells about treatments for hundreds of different health conditions. There are many links to help you find a doctor and other health providers, depending on your needs.

www.ahrq.gov

This website is run by the federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ). It focuses on medical research to help improve safety and quality of health care. The consumer part of this website has detailed and practical guides to help you get quality care. The website includes tips on questions to ask about your health care and medical treatments.

A list with more websites

The four government websites listed above are good places to start, but there are many other websites that also have reliable and accurate health information. Look for this resource on the employee benefits pages of the City's website. "A list of recommended websites with trustworthy health information."

Tips for finding and using health information

- **Visit more than one website and compare what you find.** In general, information is more trustworthy when you find the same type of information on more than one website.

- **Collect health information from other sources besides websites.** For example, you could ask your doctor and other health professionals, your health plan, and libraries. To learn more, look for this resource at the employee website City's website

  - "Good quality health care" - Information about health care quality: what it is and why you can't take it for granted.

- **Talk with your health care team about health information you find on your own.** Consider bringing the information with you to a medical visit. You may want to ask questions about it, especially if it disagrees with something you've been told.

REFERENCES

Tips in this handout are based in part on the following sources:

- *Health Information on the Web: Finding Reliable Information* by the American Academy of Family Physicians (www.familydoctor.org/online/famdocen/home/healthy/safety/safety/783.html)

- *MedlinePlus Guide to Healthy Web Surfing* by the National Library of Medicine (www.nlm.nih.gov/ medlineplus/healthywebsurfing.html)

- *A User's Guide to Finding and Evaluating Health Information on the Web* by the Medical Library Association (www.mlanet.org/resources/userguide.html#1)

- *Online Health Information: Can You Trust It?* by the National Institute on Aging (www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation/publications/onlinehealth.html)

- *Evaluating Health Information on the Internet* by the National Cancer Institute (www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Information/internet)