**Helping Hand™**   *Health Education for Patients and Families*

# Can You Trust Health Information on the Web?

It is important that you know how to find health information you can trust.  This list can help you know what to look for and how to decide what information is valuable.

## Plan your search

- **Know your goals.** Different websites are good at different things. Are you looking for support or information? **Chat rooms and forums** can be wonderful sources of support, but may or may not give reliable medical information. **Medical journal websites** may offer in-depth information on diseases and treatments, but may seem cold, distant or clinical. Your goals will help you decide where to look.

- **Keep a list.** Write down words that may be useful and a list of questions you have.

- **Talk with your child's health care providers.** They may be able to help you with search terms (with correct spelling) or share good websites that will help in your search.

- **Ask the librarians at the Nationwide Children's Hospital Library** to help you find what you need. They can give you a list of reliable websites and will help you with learning the medical terms you need to know. You can also contact the Nationwide Children's Hospital librarians at library3@nationwidechildrens.org.

- **Be ready to find conflicting information.** You can find different views about almost every health issue. Remember that some information you find will be opinion, not fact. Other information will be anecdotal. This means one person had a particular outcome, but that outcome may be unusual or not supported by scientific evidence. Sometimes it is hard to tell the difference. Trust yourself and your child's health care providers to find the answers that best fit your family.

## Check the source

- **Look for .edu (edu**cational institution**), .org (org**anization, usually not-for-profit), or **.gov (gov**ernment agency) **in the name of the website.** The information on a site that ends in **.com (com**mercial business) may not be fair and report all information equally. Commercial websites are businesses. They may offer information to help sell a product or service.

- **Where did the information come from and who is the author?**

  Is the author's name (or the name of the organization that wrote the article) clearly stated? What makes the author an expert on the subject? Why is the author sharing this information? Is there a way to contact the author with other questions? An author does not have to be an expert on a topic, but they should be able to tell you where they are getting their information and their reason for sharing it. Keep in mind that anyone can share anything on social media. A lot of people may agree with what they post or write, but that does not make the information true and trustworthy.

- **Check the date.** You should be able to tell when the document was last reviewed, updated or checked for accuracy. New medical research is published all the time. Is the date of the last revision clearly marked? If information is only valid for a short time, is this clearly labeled? Can you find more recent information on the topic?

- **Is the information be verified independently or is it just the author's view?** Does the information urge you to buy a product or service offered through the website? For example, if you find a website that promotes exercise and active living, are they also trying to sell exercise equipment? Other sites exist to promote a brand. That does not mean the information is wrong. Just keep in mind that the information may have another purpose that benefits the author rather than the reader.

- **Wikipedia.org and other Wiki sites may be not-for-profit. However,** remember that **anyone** can upload content to Wikis. Wikipedia might be fine for finding overview information. It can sometimes give good sources to help with your search. The sections called "See also" and "Notes and references" at the bottom of each article can be a helpful start.

## Judge the content

- **Is it focused on pediatrics** (medical care for kids)**?** Health information and advice for adults may not apply to a child. Is the source of information an expert in pediatrics?

- **Does it diagnose or offer specific medical advice?** No website can know your family well enough to diagnose a condition. A website should never replace your child's doctor and their advice. Any website that claims to know the best treatment

for your child's medical symptoms should not be trusted unless your doctor agrees with that advice.

- **Is there clear and adequate disclosure?** Is there a possibility for bias or conflict of interest? Is a company telling you that only their product or service is valuable? Are all sides of the issue presented? Are commercial links or sponsors clearly stated and separate from the health information? If the site asks for information about you, do they tell you exactly why they want it? Do they state their privacy guidelines?

- **What kind of proof is given for endorsing a specific treatment or service?** The results of scientific studies are different from first-hand experiences.

- **Are there clear caution statements?** Does the site offer a clear statement that health information should not be taken as health advice or as a substitute for visiting a health care professional?

- **Check the funding source.** Sometimes a site will be funded by outside sources like advertisers or foundations. The funding source should be clearly named. Advertising should be presented so that you can clearly tell the difference between ads and content.

- **Discuss your findings with your health care provider.** The information you find may or may not apply to your child and their individual condition. Your child's doctor or nurse can help you interpret and understand how the information relates to you and your child.

- **Have fun exploring!** An important job of every parent is caring and advocating for your children. The internet is full of reliable and trust-worthy sources that can improve your understanding of health conditions and help your family make medical decisions. Deciding between good information and not-so-good information is part of that process.