Looking for Health Information on the Web

The number of web sites offering health-related information is amazing. And that number is growing everyday. Many sites do a great job, while others may be unreliable or misleading. The following questions may help you sort through the good, the better, and the "don't bother" sites.

1. Who runs this site?

Any good health-related web site should make it easy for you to learn who is responsible for the site and its information.

2. Who pays for the site?

It costs money to run a web site. The source of a web site's funding should be clear. Funding sources can affect content. For example, does the site sell advertising? Do the products have health-related claims?

3. What is the purpose of the site?

An "About This Site" link appears on many sites. This is worth using. The purpose of the site should be clearly stated and should help you evaluate the trustworthiness of the information.

4. Where does the information come from?

Many health sites post information collected from other Web sites or sources. If the person or organization in charge of the site did not create the information, the source should be indicated.

5. What is the basis of the information?

In addition to identifying who wrote the material you are reading, the site should describe the evidence that the material is based on. Medical facts and figures should have references (such as articles in medical journals). Also, opinions or advice should be clearly set apart from information that is "evidenced-based" (that is, based on research results).

6. How is the information selected?

Is there an editorial board? Do people with excellent professional and scientific qualifications review the material before it is posted?

7. How current is the information?

Web sites should be reviewed and updated on a regular basis. It is particularly important that medical information be current. The most recent update or review date should be clearly posted.

8. How does the site choose links to other sites?

Web sites usually have a policy about how they establish links to other sites. Some link to any site that asks or pays for a link. Others only link to sites that have met certain criteria.

9. What information about you does the site collect and why?

Web sites often track the paths visitors take through their sites to learn what pages are being used. Be careful about web sites that ask for you to "subscribe" or "become a member." This will give the site personal information about you. Any credible health site asking for this kind of information should tell you exactly what they will and will not do with it. Be certain that you read and understand any privacy

policy or similar language on the site, and don't sign up for anything that you are not sure you fully understand.

10. How does the site manage interactions with visitors?

There should always be a way for you to contact the site owner if you run across problems or have questions or feedback.

Excerpted from the NCCAM fact sheet "10 Things to Know About Evaluating Medical Resources on the Web."