USING THE INTERNET TO RESEARCH MENOPAUSE HEALTH INFORMATION

The internet is an effective means of researching all kinds of information. People concerned with health use the internet to search for information about various symptoms, diseases, conditions and treatments. However, not all the content on the internet is of high quality.

Be smart when looking at online health information. Rely on common sense and carefully evaluate what you read on the web. The internet can give you a range of information quickly, but *always discuss health concerns and web information with your doctor.*

WHAT MAKES A GOOD WEBSITE?

Meeting any 'code of practice' on the internet is voluntary. Sometimes individuals or organisations create websites to promote their own interests.

There are a number of things that can help you to decide on the content quality. DISCERN - **www.discern.org.uk** - provides users with a valid and reliable way of assessing the quality of written information on treatment choices for a health problem. Also consider the suggestions below.

Who is responsible for the website?

This should be easy to identify as is often on the 'home' page or may be found on the "About us" page.

Who pays for the website?

Web addresses with 'gov' in their domain name are hosted by federal or state governments 'org' is often used by noncommercial organisations, and 'com' usually means a commercial business. The source of funding can influence the content of the website.

Is the information evidence-based?

It is important that the health information you refer to is evidencebased. This means that it is based on scientifically proven, published research. Websites should state the source of their claims and information provided. Avoid sites that cannot prove





their claims with more than personal experiences or unclear sources.

Remember that healthcare in other countries may be organised in different ways than in Australia. Some treatments suggested may not be approved for use here, and conditions or medicines can have different names in different countries.

Is the content balanced?

A balanced website provides a good overall account of all information available connected with your topic of interest. Some sites provide information that focuses on one point of view only, or provide a lot of unusual or unrelated information. These sites should be viewed with caution.

Is the author's name and qualifications given on publications?

Always look at who has provided the information. The author's name, qualifications and the institute where they were obtained should be listed. If no author is listed, look for the organisation which created the website and check if it is reputable. Generally, the 'Who We Are?' or 'What We Do?' pages state the aims of the host organisation. You should also be able to verify the 'Contact Us' details, listing the organisation's address and other contact information.

Are there any conflict of interest?

Why was the website created? Was it to provide health information or promote a product? If one brand stands out in the website content, then it may not be from a balanced source. Is there advice about who should not use a product? Always conduct more research, particularly when investigating treatment options, to make sure the information has no favouritism toward any individual, organisation or brand.

How current is the information?

Health and medical information often changes. Check the date on which the information was posted. How old is it? Is the website updated regularly? Check when it was last updated. Make sure the information reflects the most current thinking and scientific findings available.

Is there a privacy policy?

Websites asking for your personal details need to explain what they will use them for. Read the website's Privacy Statement to make sure that any information you supply will be kept confidential and will not be sold to a third party, and that ongoing communications from the site will be sent only at your request.





Is there a way of interacting with the producers of the website?

You should be able to contact a website host (Web Manager) to note any queries or problems found. Email the Web Manager with your feedback or questions and you should expect a prompt reply.

SIGNS OF UNRELIABLE INFORMATION

- The site uses only case histories or personal testimonies as proof.
- The site uses only one study as proof.
- The site claims that the treatment works for everyone with that condition.
- The site claims that the treatment works immediately and permanently with no medical intervention required.
- The site claims to have a cure for a condition.
- The site promotes self-diagnosis and self-prescription.

WHERE DO I START?

Gateways

There are a number of highly regarded health 'gateway' sites, which contain links to other pages. These sites are government-hosted, and their content must go through a rigorous assessment and editorial process.

- Healthdirect www.healthdirect.gov.au
- Better Health Channel www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- Health on the Net Foundation (HON) www.hon.ch has a specialised search engine and directory to locate reliable sources of information

Search engines

You may also use a generic web search engine, such as Google www.google.com or Bing www.bing.com. You just type a few words in the search box, and a list of websites is offered in seconds.

There are ways of using a search engine that save you reading hundreds of pages to find the precise facts you need. In most cases, you can specify .on your search page whether you want to search all of the internet or just local pages. Another way of doing this is to add 'Australia' to the words you type in the search box. To ensure it is the latest information, type in the current year.

It also helps to be specific in your search criteria to reduce the number of pages that come back and to improve the quality of websites found. Pages appearing first on a list of results might not be the most relevant. Organisations can pay to have their web page appear high on results lists. These are usually shown as sponsored links.





Recommended weblinks

Once you have identified a good website, it is a good idea to have a look at their list of recommended weblinks. These are websites that have been identified as providing extra health information on the topic you are researching. This will save you a lot of time and energy.

MEDICAL JOURNALS

Sometimes you might want to find articles written about your area of interest that are published in medical journals. This can be helpful if you are researching a rare condition or new treatment. There are various medical databases available. Two commonly used databases are PubMed www.pshi.plm.pib.gov/pubmed.and

used databases are PubMed www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed and Medscape www.medscape.com. These sites were designed to be used by doctors and scientists, so you might have to think carefully about how to search and how to understand the results.

WHEN YOU FIND A GOOD WEBSITE - WHAT NEXT?

Talk to your doctor about the information you found. Be wary of taking packs of printed information to an appointment as this can be overwhelming. A useful idea is to put the facts you find together as a list of questions to ask your doctor.

Create a personal medical journal

If you have found several websites offering relevant facts, copy the information from the site to a Word document. Note the web address (or URL) of the website your research is taken from, and date each entry. This is a handy reference tool for the future when you want to explain your health condition to family and friends, or refresh your mind on a particular detail. Use this information to prepare questions for your doctor or health professional.

If you prefer to print internet pages, ensure you bookmark these websites under the Favourites menu on your computer. Most web browsers also print the web address of pages you print and report the date of printing. Information on the internet can change daily and there is no guarantee that a few weeks later the information will still be there.

Take charge of your health information

It is a good idea to put all your health information in one place. This makes is easier for you to access and to pass on to health professionals, family members or close friends as you choose or in an emergency.

You could include your personal records relating to the use of traditional and complementary treatments, optical, dental and immunisations. It can also include the health history of other





family members, which will build a family health archive for use by your children in the future. You can even schedule SMS text reminders so that you'll never miss an appointment or forget to renew a prescription!

SOCIAL MEDIA

A growing number of social media applications are focusing on the topic of health. A blog (a blend of the terms web and log) is a type of website. Blogs contain regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material, such as graphics or videos. Most blogs are interactive, allowing visitors to leave comments and even message each other.

An internet forum, or message board, is an online discussion site where people can hold conversations in the form of posted messages. Depending on the forum's settings, users can beeither anonymous or registered with the forum, and then subsequently logged-in, to post messages. On most forums, users do not have to log in to read existing messages.

Social networking areas like Facebook are also homes for various online support groups. Patients comment about their struggle with a particular disease or condition, sharing their stories with friends, family and others with similar issues.

If you are using a social media application, always refer to the terms of reference and code of conduct for using the service. This should be clearly defined on the website. You may also want to find out if the forum is 'moderated' or controlled and if so, by whom and why.

For more information about Menopause health, please visit <u>www.healthdirect.org.au</u>, <u>www.jeanhailes.org.au</u> or <u>www.menopause.org.au</u> to access free health literature.

This is intended as a general introduction to this topic and is not meant to substitute for your doctor's or health professional's advice. It should be noted that each person's experience is individual and that variations do occur in treatment and management due to personal circumstances, the health professional and the country one lives in. Should you require further information always consult your doctor or health professional.

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