

FACTSHEET

This fact sheet is for education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other health professionals to make sure this information is right for your child. If you would like to provide feedback on this fact sheet, please visit: www.schn.health.nsw.gov.au/parents-and-carers/fact-sheets/feedback-form.

Evaluating health information on the Internet

What is the Internet?

The Internet is a huge store of information connecting networks of computers worldwide. Websites and social media pages can contain large amounts of information. Sometimes this information is accurate, but in some cases the information may be inaccurate or misleading.

Health information on the Internet

The Internet can be a valuable resource for health information. Online information can help you understand your illness better and help you to work with your doctor to get the best medical care. The fact that information is published on the Internet however, does not make it true.

Evaluating the information

It is important to evaluate the information you have found during a search on the Internet to make sure it is accurate and comes from a reliable source. When evaluating, think critically and don't accept any information at face value.

Ask yourself:

Who is responsible for the website or social media channel?

- Is the information from a reliable website? Is it linked with a trust worthy institution or organisation? For example; Healthdirect (www.healthdirect.gov.au) which is provided by the Australian Department of Health and Ageing can be seen as authoritative and reliable.

- Is the information written by health professionals? What are their qualifications? Is there a reputable editorial board that reviews the information? Are the claims supported by references?
- Is the website or social media channel run by an organisation with a specific agenda or interest?
- Are there contact details on the page where you can contact the publisher or make comments and ask questions? By looking at the URL (Uniform Resource Locator) and the domain, you can learn ownership and/or sponsorship of the site. A person's name in the URL may mean it is a personal site.

URL example: <https://www.health.gov.au/>
(The Australian Government, Department of Health)

Upper Level Domain may indicate:

.gov	government
.edu	educational
.org	non-profit organisation
.com	commercial

Social media channels

Are the pages verified (tick next to the channel name)?

Does the page link to a website that has an Upper Level Domain?

Is the information accurate?

- Does the site base its information on facts?
- Does it use a sound scientific basis for any claims that it makes? If the information sounds unbelievable and has no evidence for its claims, it is probably unreliable.
- Health information gained through the Internet is not a substitute for professional, independent medical advice.

Is the information objective?

- Is the information presented without bias? Is it clear and well balanced in its details?
- Is there a conflict of interest such as being based on commercial interest? Are any conflicts of interest declared on the website? A website published by a commercial organisation or business may be trying to sell a product and would be less likely to give any negative points relating to the product. Be cautious if there is no evidence, and only testimonials to recommend a product or treatment!
- It is important to understand *why* the information is being made available and the purpose behind the site. For example Healthdirect tells us it is “a free service supported by the governments of Australia”

Is the information up-to-date?

- Does the information have a date it was created? This is especially important with health information, as it is constantly changing. When was the website last updated? This will indicate if the page is being kept current or not.

Use the checklist from eMed credential

Questions from the checklist are included at the end of this factsheet.

Does the content of the site meet your needs?

- Who is the site aimed at? If the information is aimed at health care providers, it may assume knowledge of medicine that you do not have.
- Is the information easy to understand? What is the scope of the information?
- Are the links reliable and relevant? Do they work?
- Does it cite other reputable sources?
- Is the site layout straightforward to use? Is it well designed? Easy to navigate? This is important for you to be able to gain the most from the site.

Remember:

- Anyone can publish information on the Internet – it doesn't make it true!
- Be wary of incorrect information and false claims, and make sure that the website is not run by an organisation with a specific agenda or interest.
- Health information gained through the Internet is not a substitute for professional independent medical advice.

eMed credential checklist questions

What is the domain name?

Look at the website's URL (address).

What does it say about the organization? e.g. The Children's Hospitals Network has a domain name of 'nsw.gov.au' showing it is a government organisation.

Some examples are:

- .org (an organization for profit or not for profit)
- .edu (an education institution)
- .com (a business)
- .gov (a government website)

Does the website have advertisements on it that are from other companies?

If yes, it's less likely to be evidence based.

Is the information up to date?

- Look at the dates of publication or copyright of the information.
 - Look at the dates of any revisions.
- Good content should be reviewed and updated every few years. If it is very old information it is less trustworthy.

Who are the authors and are they qualified to give this information?

- Are they health professionals, such as doctors?
- Are they experienced?
- If an organisation is providing the information, is it a non-profit organisation?
- Are the members of the organisation qualified health professionals?

Are the sources of the information clear?

Do the main statements include a reference to the sources of the information, e.g. research by many people or the opinion of more than one expert?

If an expert's opinion is the source, can you see whether this person is qualified to give this information? Do they belong to a non-profit organisation with qualified health professionals?

Is the information based on proven medical evidence?

Any medical or health statements must be based on proof.

Does the information match information from other sources?

If possible, check the information with information from other websites.

Is the information unbiased?

- Does the website give information from an objective point of view, not a personal opinion?
- Does the website write about a topic with more than one source of information?
- Does the website give the advantages and disadvantages of different types of treatment, not just one choice?
- Is the information balanced, not emotional and dramatic?

Is there a seal of certification from a trusted organisation?

- e.g. HON – Health On the Net or the blue verified tick.