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Consumer Health Information on the Internet

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Class Description

This class demonstrates online health information resources for consumers that are authoritative, current, and accurate. Participants will learn how to use them quickly and efficiently to gather information for clients. Topics covered will include materials written in languages other than English, at low reading levels, and for specific population groups.

By the end of the class, participants will:

- Be familiar with a manageable number of quality web sources of consumer health information
- Be familiar with the criteria for evaluating the value of consumer health information.
- Know how to navigate the sites demonstrated efficiently.

Evaluating the Quality of Consumer Health Information

The following section from MedlinePlus is geared towards consumers. If you are looking for information for a specific client, in addition to these guidelines, also consider the reading level and intended audience of the information.

MedlinePlus Guide to Healthy Web Surfing

Source : <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/healthywebsurfing.html>

What should you look for when evaluating the quality of health information on Web sites? Here are some suggestions based on our experience.

Consider the source--Use recognized authorities
Know who is responsible for the content.

- Look for an "about us" page. Check to see who runs the site: is it a branch of the Federal Government, a non-profit institution, a professional organization, a health system, a commercial organization or an individual.
- There is a big difference between a site that says, "I developed this site after my heart attack" and one that says, "This page on heart attack was developed by health professionals at the American Heart Association."
- Web sites should have a way to contact the organization or webmaster. If the site provides no contact information, or if you can't easily find out who runs the site, use caution.

Focus on quality--All Web sites are not created equal

Does the site have an editorial board? Is the information reviewed before it is posted?

- This information is often on the "about us" page, or it may be under the organization's mission statement, or part of the annual report.

- See if the board members are experts in the subject of the site. For example, a site on osteoporosis whose medical advisory board is composed of attorneys and accountants is not medically authoritative.
- Look for a description of the process of selecting or approving information on the site. It is usually in the "about us" section and may be called "editorial policy" or "selection policy" or "review policy."
- Sometimes the site will have information "about our writers" or "about our authors" instead of an editorial policy. Review this section to find out who has written the information.

Be a cyberskeptic--Quackery abounds on the Web

Does the site make health claims that seem too good to be true? Does the information use deliberately obscure, "scientific" sounding language? Does it promise quick, dramatic, miraculous results? Is this the only site making these claims?

- Beware of claims that one remedy will cure a variety of illnesses, that it is a "breakthrough," or that it relies on a "secret ingredient."
- Use caution if the site uses a sensational writing style (lots of exclamation points, for example.)
- A health Web site for consumers should use simple language, not technical jargon.
- Get a second opinion! Check more than one site.

Look for the evidence--Rely on medical research, not opinion

Does the site identify the author? Does it rely on testimonials?

- Look for the author of the information, either an individual or an organization. Good examples are "Written by Jane Smith, R.N.," or "Copyright 2003, American Cancer Society."
- If there are case histories or testimonials on the Web site, look for contact information such as an email address or telephone number. If the testimonials are anonymous or hard to track down ("Jane from California"), use caution.

Check for currency--Look for the latest information

Is the information current?

- Look for dates on documents. A document on coping with the loss of a loved one doesn't need to be current, but a document on the latest treatment of AIDS needs to be current.
- Click on a few links on the site. If there are a lot of broken links, the site may not be kept up-to-date.

Beware of bias--What is the purpose? Who is providing the funding?

Who pays for the site?

- Check to see if the site is supported by public funds, donations or by commercial advertising.
- Advertisements should be labeled. They should say "Advertisement" or "From our Sponsor."
- Look at a page on the site, and see if it is clear when content is coming from a non-commercial source and when an advertiser provides it. For example, if a page about treatment of depression recommends one drug by name, see if you can tell if the company that manufactures the drug provides that information. If it does, you should consult other sources to see what they say about the same drug.

Protect your privacy--Health information should be confidential

Does the site have a privacy policy and tell you what information they collect?

- There should be a link saying "Privacy" or "Privacy Policy." Read the privacy policy to see if your privacy is really being protected. For example, if the site says "We share information with companies that can provide you with useful products," then your information isn't private.
- If there is a registration form, notice what types of questions you must answer before you can view content. If you must provide personal information (such as name, address, date of birth, gender, mother's maiden name, credit card number) you should refer to their privacy policy to see what they can do with your information.

Consult with your health professional--Patient/provider partnerships lead to the best medical decisions.

For further information

Visit the MedlinePlus page on *Evaluating Health Information*.

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/evaluatinghealthinformation.html>

Web Site Evaluation Exercise

Using the principles given above, evaluate the following websites:

1. Spine Universe <http://www.spineuniverse.com/>
2. myBackSolution.com <http://www.mybacksolution.com/index.htm>
3. NINDS Low Back Pain Fact Sheet
http://www.ninds.nih.gov/health_and_medical/pubs/back_pain.htm

Portal Websites for General Consumer Health

Each website listing includes a description of the site and an example of how to use the site.

MedlinePlus

National Library of Medicine

<http://www.medlineplus.gov>

Information organized by topic and by resource, such as encyclopedia, dictionary, or news. Spanish and easy reading selections are included and noted as such. There are also interactive slide presentations that can be run with or without audio on health topics such as diseases, tests, treatments, and prevention. All resources in MedlinePlus are screened for quality.

Using MedlinePlus

MedlinePlus has several sections that can be used individually, or searched all at once. The best way to find out what is available in all segments of the website on a topic is to use the search box.

Examples:

1. What information is in MedlinePlus on obesity? Locate it by:
 - a. Search the site by typing “obesity” into the search box.
 - b. Browse the Health Topics list.
2. Go to the Interactive Tutorials list. Browse for a topic that interests you, and open the tutorial. If you have a slow connection to the Internet, this may not run well.

Consumer Health Information

Health Sciences Library System, University of Pittsburgh

<http://www.hsls.pitt.edu/guides/chi/>

Contains information on General Health, Prevention, Diseases, Treatments, Finding Quality Care, Special Populations selected by librarians at the Health Sciences Library System. Some resources are specific to Pittsburgh or UPMC, but most would be of use to any audience.

Using the Consumer Health Information Site

The site is easy to browse through. Pages will vary in the amount of information offered. There is no search function built in, but browsing is manageable.

Example: Browse the Drug Information section. Go to the pages in the box labeled Highlights.

- Which page would you prefer for looking up a specific drug?
- Which would you use to look up information on a class of drugs, such as statins?

HealthFinder

US Department of Health and Human Services

<http://www.healthfinder.gov/>

HealthFinder contains consumer health information primarily from U.S. government agencies, national organizations, universities, libraries, and state and local government agencies offering information services beyond their geographic boundaries. Other sources, such as online journals, news web sites, and free information services not available from any government entity are added sparingly. Of particular interest are the searchable directories for locating health care services, and health information organized by population.

Using HealthFinder

HealthFinder can be browsed by topic or by population group (age, sex, race, role). The database can also be searched.

Examples:

1. Search for information on heart failure two ways, comparing the results
 - a. Browse the health library
 - b. Type “heart failure” in the search box.
2. Browse the Just for You section to find information for senior citizens about living independently. Do the following:
 - a. Go to “Find Homes and Services for the Aging.” Look up Community Based Services in your area by phone city or phone area code.
 - b. Look for Pennsylvania home modification services in the section “National Directory of Home Modification and Repair Programs.”

CHID (Combined Health Information Database)

National Institutes of Health

<http://chid.nih.gov/>

CHID contains information on sources of consumer health information organized by topic. CHID indexes health information in many formats, including articles, videos and patient brochures. Each section is administered by a federal agency, but may contain materials from sources outside the federal government. The databases can be searched together or separately. You can limit your search by format and/or intended audience. The databases do not contain the actual information products, but records that tell you where you more about the product, and where you can obtain a copy, either on the web or through another source.

Using the CHID Website

Example: Find sources of videos and cook books for adolescents with diabetes.

1. Go to the CHID website, and click on the Detailed Search button.
2. Leave the database choice on “All CHID Databases.”
3. Under “Search in These Fields,” leave the first box set to “anywhere in the record”, and enter the word diabetes.
4. In the second box, change the setting to “anywhere in the record.” And enter the words “*adolescents or teen or teens or teenagers*”
5. Scroll down to the bottom of the page. In the Format box, choose “videorecording.” Click the search button, and examine the results.
6. Return to the search entry screen by hitting the back button.

7. Change the selected word in the format box to “cook book.” Rerun the search.

Specialized Portals

The following web sites are a small sample of the many available that focus on a particular topic or audience. Good starting points for locating other portals focused by topic:

1. Websites of advocacy organizations such as the American Heart Association
2. Websites of federal government health agencies The Department of Health and Human Services website, <http://www.dhhs.gov/>, is a good starting point.
3. Web directories compiled by medical libraries or public libraries, such as the HSLS Internet Guides <http://www.hsls.pitt.edu/guides/internet>.

ToxTown

National Library of Medicine
<http://toxtown.nlm.nih.gov/>

Find out what environmental health risks can be encountered in the town and in the country using this interactive site. Both a Macromedia Flash version and a text version are offered. ToxTown offers an easy to use, enjoyable interface for consumers, with reliable indoor and outdoor environmental health information organized by location.

Using ToxTown

ToxTown’s interactive pictures allow you to navigate the environmental health information by clicking on locations in the two current settings, the town and the city. If you do not have the ability to use the graphic interface, you can use the text only version, which contains all the same information, but is not as much fun.

Examples:

1. Go to the Town. Mouse over the picture, and find the link to Homes. Click on it.
 - a. When the more detailed version of the home opens up, you will have a new menu to the right of the picture with links to resources on environmental hazards in the home. Choose some of interest to you and follow the links.
 - b. In the top right corner of the picture is a label “Chemical Hot Spots.” Mouse over it for a list of common chemicals to appear. Roll the mouse down the list and watch the picture. For each chemical, the areas it is likely to be will be highlighted.
 - c. Click on one of the chemical names to see a list of resources related to that chemical.
2. Mouse over Neighborhoods in the top of the picture. Click on City in the drop down menu that appears.

- a. In the City, explore what happens when you mouse over the words relating to locations and hazards at the bottom of the picture.

Household Products Database

National Library of Medicine, Specialized Information Services

<http://householdproducts.nlm.nih.gov/>

Search or browse by product category for information about the substances found in over 5,000 popular household products. Information about the products includes brand name, manufacturer and their contact information, Material Safety Data Sheets, and information about each ingredient. Ingredient information includes name and chemical id number, health studies, and links to Toxnet the ChemID system from NLM. Most of the information linked from the ChemID system is professional or technical in nature, and may not of use to the consumer.

While this is not an exhaustive database of all household products, it does make a good starting point. The producer of the database also warns that manufacturers' formulas are subject to change, and refers users back to the product label for confirmation of the product contents.

Using Household Products Database

The database can be browsed or searched. When a product is located, the information included will have links to other sources.

Example: What ingredients are in Thompson deck cleaner?

1. Approach #1- search for the word "Thompson" in the quick search box on the main page. (note that the actual name is slightly different, but still was retrieved)
2. Approach #2 – Browse the product database by choosing Landscaping/Yard as a category, then cleaner, then deck.
3. Note that there are two different records for Thompsons Deck Wash. One is older than the other. Be sure you are looking at the most current record by clicking on each and noting the Date Entered.
4. Scroll through the most recent record, and note the information provided.
5. At the bottom of the record, find the name of the chemical ingredient(s). Click on Sodium hypochlorite. This will take you to a list of all products in the database containing the chemical and links to other information resources on the chemical.
6. At the top of the record, find "Information from other National Library of Medicine databases."
 - a. Clicking on the ChemIDplus link takes you to the most information.
 - b. The other links are duplicated under the ChemIDplus link.

Food and Nutrition Information Center

National Agricultural Library

<http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/>

FNIC contains nutrition and food safety information collected by the National Agricultural Library. Not strictly for consumers, the site includes professional materials, and consumer information in English and Spanish.

Using the Food and Nutrition Information Center

This website is large, and complex. FNIC provides several ways to look at a topic. Do not assume that your topic isn't available until you have tried all the access points.

1. Several of the most frequently requested topics are in the left menu bar.
2. For topics that don't have a button in the left hand menu, the Topics A-Z list is probably the best starting point.
3. If the A-Z list doesn't contain your topic, try the search link at the top of the home page.
4. FNIC contains databases that can be searched. They are not included in the Search linked from the top of the home page. To search them, click on the FNIC Databases button in the left menu bar.

Example: A client has recently learned that they need to lower their cholesterol. They have heard that trans fatty acids are bad for them, but don't know what they are or what foods contain them. Find information on trans fatty acids written for consumers.

1. Follow the steps above until you reach suitable information.

Multilingual Resources

Health Sciences Library System, University of Pittsburgh

<http://www.hsls.pitt.edu/guides/phia/links/consumer/multilingual>

This site contains links to other sites that contain consumer health information in languages other than English. The site is not large, and is best used by browsing.

When Portals Aren't Enough

Searching the Internet for Consumer Health Information

At times you will be unsuccessful in locating just the right information using portal web sites that have been collected specifically for consumers. Then you will want to search the Internet in general for your topic.

In constructing your search, consider using terms that consumers would use to describe health conditions in conjunction with or instead of professional terms.

When looking at the materials retrieved, keep in mind the evaluation principles covered in the first section of this document.

Clear & Simple : Developing Effective Print Materials for Low-Literate Readers

<http://cancer.gov/cancerinformation/clearandsimple>

When you need to write your own material, this site is a good resource on writing for low literacy audiences. Sponsored by the National Cancer Institute, it covers the steps in developing your own materials. Includes advice on defining your audience, communication style, layout and design, and tools for testing reading level.