

Tips to Finding and Evaluating Medical Information

- ◆ Identify the **key concepts** and **words** to be searched, including word variations and *synonyms*
- ◆ Determine the **type of information** needed (general or technical information? Adult audience or children/adolescents?)
- ◆ Use a search engine like *Google* <http://www.google.com/> and *Yahoo* <http://www.yahoo.com> or take advantage of established, pre-selected Internet collections like *COD's Consumer Health Resources* http://www.cod.edu/library/libweb/Kakuk/consumer_health.htm, or *MedlinePlus* <http://medlineplus.gov/> from the National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health
- ◆ Information comes in many different forms: books, journal or magazine articles, newspapers, blogs, Internet articles or Web sites, YouTube videos, and images (print or electronic). Whether a resource is print or electronic, text-based or image-based, researchers must carefully evaluate the **credibility** of the source and the **quality** of the information retrieved.

Authorship/Authority Is the resource created by a credible medical-related organization, individual, or educational institution? Is it by an individual with first-hand experience who is putting up his/her personal experiences? From a support standpoint, the latter might be useful to some health information seekers, but the first example would be more likely to give out objective and accurate information.

Bias Is the source objective, or is it trying to sell a medical product or service? Does it present straight facts or does it try to influence consumers to one side of an argument/debate or another? Checking authorship might be essential here, as certain types of authors may have a philosophical or ethical viewpoint that is different from others. Having a philosophical or bio-ethical viewpoint does not negate the validity of a site, but rather can foster debate and examination of issues. However, it is preferable that a site should clearly represent its persuasion.

Content/Scope What type of health-related information is contained in the resource? Is it annotated and is it comprehensive, or does it cover a specific area/piece of a topic? Depending on a researcher's question, the type of content/scope required of a resource will change. For example, in-depth questions on health topics would be best answered in a medical resource (medical encyclopedia, journal, or Web site) rather than a general encyclopedia or multiple-subject magazine (like *Newsweek*).

Currency How current is the resource? Check the copyright date on a printed book or the publication date of a magazine or journal. Does a Web site or Internet article give a "last updated or revised" message? If not, it is questionable how timely the site is. Some authors create a site and never maintain it.

Ease of Use Is a print resource well organized? Does it have a comprehensive index at the end and a table of contents at the beginning? Is a Web site easy to navigate? Do all of the links work and is the site designed so as to have self-explanatory categories? Are the graphics too large or cumbersome and does the site load quickly or slowly? Many people get annoyed and impatient with sites that take too long to load or have dead links. A book that has no index or table of contents to steer readers to specific material is equally frustrating.

Level Is the resource intended for medical and health professionals or average people (including students)? What is the reading level of the material? Is it intended for adults or children? Young adults or seniors?

Purpose What does the resource intend to do? Is it designed to give objective facts and information, sell something, or persuade?

Reliability/Accuracy Does the resource include references and documentation to back up its claims and information?

Uniqueness Does the content of the resource have a specific value? Does the resource contain material that either cannot be found elsewhere or is presented in a better way than in other sources?