



Science Reporter

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Health Information on the Net – Tread with Caution!

Surf through websites displaying information on health and diseases and you would wonder why at all people of the world should continue to be afflicted with such dreaded diseases like AIDS and cancer when miraculous cures are on offer everywhere. There are hundreds of websites awash with scientifically sounding medical advice. They offer quick and easy remedies for chronic medical conditions.

Dig a little deeper and you find many such websites have been floated by people who have no medical qualifications. The information they display is inaccurate, false and misleading. They are just out to cash in on the frustrations and insecurities of people afflicted with diseases. Some even claim medical industries and conventional doctors are out to silence them and hence their treatments are not offered publicly.

But this is not to say that all of the health information on the Internet is not to be believed. There is a lot of information on websites that is reliable. But there are many websites that are peddling incorrect information; in some cases, the information being displayed is not current. While medical research moves ahead at a fast pace some even authentic websites do not update their information giving outdated information to surfers who happen to land on their site.

In a study on sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) published in August 2012 in the online Journal of Pediatrics, Dr. Rachel Moon and colleagues found that almost 55% websites contained inaccurate information or information that was not medically relevant. The study found that almost 20% were retail product websites, which had the lowest level of medical accuracy. On the other hand, government websites and websites of national organizations had the highest level of accuracy (80.9% and 72.5%, respectively).

Even educational websites (universities or other websites with URL's ending in .edu, ebooks, peer-reviewed articles) only had 50.2% accurate or updated medical information. Blogs and websites of individuals also had very low rates of medical accuracy (25.7% and 30.3%).

According to another study by researchers at the University of Michigan Health System, using the Internet to look up health information may be fast and easy, but it may also lead you to inaccurate, misleading or unproven advice.

Searching for information on the Internet on a single type of cancer the researchers found that nearly half the pages had information that had not been scientifically validated, about 6% had wrong information, and others were misleading. The search also turned up hundreds of dead ends, bad links and pages that had no medical information even though they were found in a search.

But all health information on the Internet cannot be condemned. However, we need to exercise great caution while travelling on the information superhighway. Ask questions like: Who runs the website? What is the purpose of the website – to sell a product? Beware of websites that offer dramatic, miraculous results and beware of claims that one remedy will cure a variety of illnesses.

Be#er still, look for the source of the information. Generally, government-sponsored websites (that end in “.gov”), “.edu” sites, which are run by universities or medical schools, “.org” sites maintained by not-for-profit groups whose focus is research and disseminating information about specific diseases or conditions to the public, and sites of medical and scientific journals offer reliable health information.

However, government institutions, organizations and educational websites also need to realize the importance of maintaining up-to-date and accessible medical information on their websites. After all, websites offer the convenience of instant and constant updation.

Hasan Jawaid Khan



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