

# Finding Legitimate Cancer Information on the Internet

## How to Safely Travel Through Cyberspace

by Edward Leigh, MA

The Internet offers excellent cancer information, but wading through multiple sites to find the best material can be cumbersome. There are things you can do to find reliable accurate information. This article focuses on Internet searches and evaluating websites.

Even before turning on your computer, ask your healthcare team for suggested websites. They will be familiar with organizations that can help you.

## Using Search Engines

*Narrowing Your Search.* When using search engines, if you type in a variety of words, it will search out those words, but they may be scattered through a website. For example, let's say you place these three words in a search engine: COPING WITH CANCER. You may find websites that discusses COPING with allergies, cereal WITH fiber and new CANCER vaccines. If you want to find the words as one unit, place quotation marks around the phrase. For example, typing "coping with cancer" with quotes in the search engine will find that phrase as one unit. This is often helpful to get specific pieces of information.

*Search Engines do not Evaluate Resources.* Be aware, however, that although a search engine can provide resources, it does not evaluate the information on the resources. For example, a search on the words "breast cancer" is just as likely to point to a page advertising a reconstructive surgeon or a health food store's article on the purported benefits of an herb as it is to the National Cancer Institute. It is up to the website visitor to evaluate the information the site contains. Also, the order in which the results appear in a specific search do not necessarily indicate that they are the best or most appropriate. In fact, some search engines offer prominent placement in search results for a fee.

### **\*\*Fun Tip!\*\***

The search engines could also help if you have limited pieces of information. For example, let's say you were just referred to a new surgeon and forgot the surgeon's name, but you do have the surgeon's phone number written on a Post-it® Note. You can go to a search engine and type in the phone number; you will most likely find the doctor's name. It is amazing what you can do with search engines!

## Analyzing Website Credibility

*Type of Website.* For ease of discussion, websites will be divided into two types: commercial and non-commercial. The non-commercial sites include non-profit organizations (generally speaking, sites that end in .org), government agencies (.gov) and educational institutions (.edu). Even though there are many wonderful commercial sites with excellent information, however their information may be biased

toward their products and/or services. For example, let's say you are reading a website article on the benefits of exercise. Is it a non-profit organization trying to promote exercise and active living or is it a fitness product company trying to sell you exercise equipment? Obviously, you can see the commercial site information would be biased.

*Purpose of Website.* Is the site trying to inform or sell? Websites that are selling a product or service have to be evaluated carefully. Here are some red flags that should have you running in the opposite direction: promise of a miracle cure or one remedy that can cure almost everything. The word "natural" should be scrutinized carefully. Just because an item is natural does not make it good. Cyanide and arsenic are natural items!.

*Current Information.* In the world of cancer, new information is literally coming out on a daily basis. When looking at a website, check for the date of the last update. If the information is only valid for a short time, that fact must be stated.

*Funding Source.* Who is paying for the website? Support for a website must be clearly identified, including the names of commercial and non-commercial organizations.

*Scientific Proof.* The website should have evidence from scientific studies done through approved organizations. Only vigorously studied and approved treatments are acceptable. When a website simply lists testimonials from individuals with no scientific basis, be wary!"

*Medical/Scientific Advisory Board.* Legitimate health websites have professionals that review information. The board members should be accredited authorities on the subject from reputable organizations. If not, the author should state his/her perspective on the subject. For example, by saying "I'm a cancer survivor." Be wary of individuals whose name is simply preceded by Dr. or Doctor. In some cases, individuals have doctorate degrees in areas that have nothing to do with healthcare, such as a degree in sociology. Preferably, credentials should follow the name, so it's clear whether they're an MD or other type of degree, such as PhD or EdD (doctorate in education). As a reminder, there are people with PhDs and EdDs in healthcare related fields that can offer excellent advice, just as long as it is appropriate for the context of the discussion.

*Good Links does not Necessarily Make a Good Website.* Links alone are not a guarantee of reliability. Since anyone with a website can create links to any other site on the Internet and the owner of the site that is "linked to" has no say over who links to it. The person offering suspect medical advice could conceivably try to make his or her advice appear legitimate by, say, creating a link to the FDA's (Food and Drug Administration) website.

*Mention that the Internet is a Supplement, not a Substitute for Quality Medical Care.* The Internet can help you find excellent information, however it does not replace visiting healthcare professionals. The website should offer a clear statement that health information should not be taken as a substitute for visiting a healthcare professional.

*Contact Information Provided.* A legitimate website should provide contact information about the author and/or organization (for example, full name, address, phone number, e-mail address).

#### Helpful Websites

[www.hon.ch](http://www.hon.ch) Health On the Net Foundation (HON) is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to help both laypersons and medical practitioners find useful and reliable medical and health information online. The HON Foundation issues a HONcode designation for medical and health websites that adheres to their eight principles.

[www.quackwatch.org](http://www.quackwatch.org) Quackwatch Inc. is a nonprofit organization that aims to "combat health- related frauds, myths, fads, fallacies, and misconduct," with its primary focus on what it characterizes as quackery.

When driving a car, you always need to use caution. When traveling along the information superhighway, you also need to use caution. Buckle up and safe travels.

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