



## Be a Careful Internet User

A multitude of information is available at our fingertips on the World Wide Web. The Internet can be an excellent source of health-related information. In fact, seeking health information is the third most common reason people go online. According to Harris Interactive, an on-line marketing research organization, in the year 2000 over 100 million adult Americans have gone online at least once to look for health or medical information.

There are a number of forums for receiving health information on the web:

Health web sites: Provide information on a specific health-related topic, or provide general health information on a number of topics

Bulletin boards: Threaded discussions that involve health-related postings from participants

List serves: A compilation of posting that are forwarded to subscribed participants

Chat rooms: Live discussion among participants, usually related to a medically specific topic

These forums can provide a wealth of helpful information, ideas and support. However, be wary of the information that is generated. Some information might be based on personal opinions, or even worse, for the sole purpose of selling a product.

Dr. Stephen Barrett, retired psychiatrist and owner of Quackwatch.com, a non-profit corporation that combats health fraud, says, "There is a tremendous amount of information out there, but what is missing is an accuracy or reliability filter."

In order to identify fraudulent information, note the following warning signs when considering a form of treatment or therapy:

- The treatment or therapy makes glowing claims about its successes, as in promising to cure an illness(es) or disease(s)
- The treatment or therapy relies solely on personal testimonials rather than research findings reported in a reputable medical or scientific journal
- The treatment or therapy claims to 'do it all' and to 'do it quickly'

It is important to educate yourself and carefully assess the content of web sites. To evaluate the validity of a health web site, look for these important characteristics:

1. The purpose of the web site should be clearly stated.
2. The authors of the material must be identified. Look for the authors' credentials. Is the author a physician, nurse or other health care professional?
3. The owner of the web site and the organization with which the author is affiliated should be identified with contact information.
4. Beware of health web sites that appear to be trying to sell something.





5. If the web site quotes material from another source, the appropriate credit should be given.
6. The date of publication should be clearly posted. Make sure the information you are reading is current.
7. The web site should have a clearly stated privacy and security policy, especially if you are disclosing personal information.

Below is a selection of interesting and reputable health-related web sites. \*

The ALS Association – [www.alsa.org](http://www.alsa.org)

WebMD – [www.webmd.com](http://www.webmd.com)

Healthfinder – [www.healthfinder.gov](http://www.healthfinder.gov)

MayoClinic.com – [www.mayoclinic.com](http://www.mayoclinic.com)

Prevention.com – [www.prevention.com](http://www.prevention.com)

The Internet has become a valuable tool to give and receive information. As long as you can balance what you hear with the regular consultation of your physician or other medical professional, you can increase your knowledge with both efficiency and confidence.

If you have any comments about your experiences with health-related web sites or other health-related forums on the internet, please contact The ALS Association at 1-800-782-4747 or [alsinfo@alsa-national.org](mailto:alsinfo@alsa-national.org). The ALS web site is [www.alsa.org](http://www.alsa.org).

*\*The ALS Association provides these links for informational purposes only. ALSA does not endorse these web sites, nor any product or physician represented on these sites.*

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Updated June 2006

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