NHS

Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Foundation Trust: Information for Families

Finding reliable health information on the Internet

In some ways, the Internet has made searching for health information a lot easier than previously. Instead of having to visit your local library and search through lots of textbooks, you can just type in a few words and have hundreds of thousands of web pages at your fingertips. This page gives you a few hints and tips on finding reliable health information. Please let us know what you think of them.

It is vital to remember three things when you're looking for health information on the Internet:

- No one is in charge of the Internet – anyone can post information, and there is no one checking that the information is correct.

- There are some people who use the Internet to make money, either by selling medicines illegally or recommending a wonder cure that doesn't work.

- Remember that healthcare in other countries is organised in different ways to the UK. Some treatments might not be available in the UK or be offered to different people. In addition, some conditions or medicines have different names in different countries.

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Search engines – a word of warning!

It's the easiest thing in the world. Just type in a few words into a search engine, such as Google or Yahoo, and get lots of web pages back in seconds. However, there are ways of searching using a search engine that save you ploughing through thousands of pages to get the one that you want.

- In most cases, you can specify whether you want to search all of the Internet or just pages from the UK. For health information, it's generally a better idea to limit your search to UK pages. Another way of doing this is to add UK to the words you type in the search box.

- Being as specific as possible can also help reduce the number of pages that come back. For instance, if you want to know about heart disease in children, type *heart disease children* into the search box, rather than just *heart disease*.

- Using quotation marks to search for two or more words linked together can also help you find the information you want. For example, if you type in *children in hospital* without quotatione marks into Google, you get over 98 million 'hits', whereas if you type in *"children in hospital"*, you get far fewer at 115,000 hits.

- Remember that the pages appearing first in a list of results might not be the most relevant. For instance, organisations can pay to have their web page appear high in results lists.

Searching using search engines gets easier with time as you get to know how they work. Although they're a useful tool for finding health information on the Internet, there are smarter ways outlined below.

How to evaluate other websites

When you find a website covering your subject of interest, you need to ask yourself a series of questions before accepting what the website says. Remember to be cautious when reading any information on the Internet. A website that appears to be credible might not be all it seems. Learning to think critically about information is a vital skill in using information well. The sorts of questions you should be asking include:

- Who has produced the information and posted it on the Internet? Follow any links on the site that say 'home' or 'about us' to find out more. Look at the web address itself. In the UK, a web address ending in 'ac.uk' comes from an academic institution and one ending

in 'nhs.uk' comes from a hospital or health organisation. Generally, the web managers of large organisations like this have quite strict rules for what can be posted on their websites, so look at these first. If a web address contains a '~' sign, this can mean it is someone's personal home page and might not be subject to these rules. Visit websites produced by organisations you trust first, those from academic or NHS organisations should be the most reliable UK ones.

- Look at the date the information was produced and/or posted. As a general rule, be wary of any information produced more than four years ago. Medicine moves quickly and new information might have been discovered.

- Ask yourself about the purpose of the website. Is it trying to recommend a particular product to you or a specific company? If the website is selling something, the information it provides may be biased.

Finding articles in medical journals

Sometimes, you might want to find articles written about your area of interest that are published in medical journals. This can often be helpful if you are trying to find information on a rare condition or new treatment. There are various databases available but the most widely used one is called PubMed, which is available at www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed. Remember that this, and other databases, were designed to be searched by doctors and scientists, rather than lay people, so you might have to think around the subject to find the

keywords on which to search. It's also worth remembering that it is often 'unusual' cases that are published in medical journals, rather than the 'normal'. This can give you a distorted view of a condition so bear this in mind when searching.

- The first step is to type a word or phrase into the search box at the top of the screen. If you seem to be getting irrelevant results or none at all, think about other words or phrases you could use.

- You can also search for a particular author. For instance, if you want to find out what your doctor has published, you can search on his or her name in PubMed. It is helpful to know your doctor's initials (unless he or she has a very unusual name), as this will limit the number of results that come back. There is a list of GOSH clinicians available for each clinical specialty at www.gosh.nhs.uk/medical-conditions/clinical-specialties. Remember if you are using a doctor's initials to type them in like this "bloggs j".

- Once you get the results of your search, you can look at the references to the articles. The reference is the information you need to be able to find the full article in a journal.

- If you click on the article title, you can see the full reference and often a summary of the full article, called an abstract.

- Some articles are available on the Internet for free, that is, the 'full text' is available. There is often a button somewhere on this screen and clicking it will give you more information about viewing the complete article. However, a lot of the journals on PubMed require a subscription or other payment to view the article.

- If articles do not come with 'full text', you can always order them through your local library, using something called the 'inter-library loan' scheme. You will need to make a note of the complete reference, including the authors, title of the article, journal name, volume, issue and page numbers. The inter-library loan scheme might not be free but the article can often be delivered within a few days.

Using the information you find

Once you've found the information you were looking for, you need to decide what to do with it next. It's easy to find lots of credible websites but you could end up with only a pile of paper and no idea what to do next.

- Talk to your doctor about the information you've found. Be wary, though, of taking a large pile of print outs along to an appointment. This can be very off-putting for some doctors. It might be less intimidating if you use the information you find to put together a list of questions to ask your doctor. The Department of Health has produced a leaflet called *Questions to ask: getting the most out of your appointment* to get you started.

- Make a note of where you found the information. Most web browsers can be set up to print the web address of any pages you print. Make sure the date is included as well. Information on the Internet can change daily and there's no guarantee that if you go back to a site a few weeks later that the same information will still be there.

Other useful websites to visit

There are lots of websites containing information for patients, and here are a few examples. Appearance in this list does not constitute an endorsement from Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital.

- **Patient UK** www.patient.co.uk lists many of the support groups in the UK and contains factsheets on common conditions and operations.

- **NHS Choices** www.nhs.uk This website contains information on conditions, treatments, local services and healthy living.

If you would like to recommend any general health sites (not specific to any one disease or group of diseases), please tell us and we will see whether we can include it in the next edition of this information sheet.

Notes

Compiled by the Child and Family Information Group
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