

Teacher Information

Determining Reliable Sources of Online Health Information

The number of websites offering nutrition and health information grows every day. Many online resources are useful, but others may present information which is inaccurate or misleading, so it's important to find sources you can trust and to know how to evaluate their content. Below is an outline of 5 key questions to ask when assessing online nutrition and health information and determining if it is reliable.

1. Who?

Who runs the web site? Can you trust them?

Any reliable nutrition information website should make it easy for you to learn who is responsible for the site. If it isn't obvious who runs the website, look for a link on the homepage to an "About this site" page.

You can also learn about who runs a website by looking at the letters at the end of its web domain address. For example, an address which ends in ".gov" means it's a government-sponsored site; ".edu" indicates an educational institution, ".org" a noncommercial organization, and ".com" a commercial organization.

You can generally trust ".gov" and ".edu" website addresses. The presence of ".org" in an address does not guarantee a site is reputable; there have been instances where phony ".org" sites were set up to mislead consumers. Also, some legitimate ".org" sites belong to organizations that promote a specific agenda; their content may be biased. In this case getting off the website and searching for other information such as the site's authors and their funding can provide clues as to the validity and balance of information it contains.

2. What?

What does the site say? Are its claims too good to be true?

The website should describe the evidence (such as scientific journal articles) which the material is based on. Also, opinions or advice should be clearly set apart from information that is evidence-based. For example, if a site discusses health benefits people can expect from a nutrition supplement, look for references to valid scientific research that clearly support what is said.

Also check the tone and language used to communicate the message. Presentations should be balanced, unbiased and unemotional. Think critically about how descriptive adjectives encourage you to view the content of the site, and then evaluate if this is justified by the evidence.

Keep in mind that testimonials, anecdotes, unsupported claims, and opinions are not the same level of evidence as objective, science-based information.

3. When?

When was the information posted or reviewed? Is it up-to-date?

Outdated nutrition and health information can be misleading or even dangerous. Responsible health websites review and update much of their content on a regular basis, especially informational content such as fact sheets and lists of frequently asked questions (FAQs).

Other types of site content, such as news reports or summaries of scientific meetings, may never be updated; their purpose is to describe an event, rather than to provide the most up-to-date information on a topic.

To find out whether information on a web page is old or new, look for a recent date of update on the page, or the date of publication of reference if they are provided.

4. Where?

Where did the information come from? Is it based on independent scientific research?

You can be more confident in the quality of nutrition information on a website if people with credible professional and scientific qualifications write or review the material before it is posted. The researcher or reviewer should be independent of (e.g. not funded or employed by) the product or industry under review.

Many nutrition and health information websites post information collected from other websites or sources. If the person or organisation in charge of the site did not create the material, the original source should be clearly identified. Check if cited material is written by qualified nutrition or health professionals and based on evidence-based research or the work of an expert panel.

5. Why?

Why does the site exist? Is it selling something?

You should know how the website supports itself. Is it funded by the organization that sponsors it? Does it sell advertising? Is it sponsored by a company that sells dietary supplements, or other products or services? The source of funding can affect what content is presented, how it is presented and what the website owners are trying to achieve.



Activity Sheet

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Have a go using the 5 key questions.

Case Study:

Juice Plus <https://www.juiceplus.com.au/jp>



Juice Plus claims to have nutritional health benefits, such as:

- helps support heart health,
- a healthier immune system,
- and more.

View this short video <https://www.juiceplus.com.au/get-started/physical-activity--get-a-move-on>

After watching the short clip and reviewing the website, complete the table below.

Is the Juice Plus website a reliable source of nutritional information?

Key Questions		Yes	No	Unsure
1.	Who runs the web site? Can you trust them?			
2.	What does the site say? Are its claims too good to be true?			
3.	When was the information posted or reviewed? Is it up-to-date?			
4.	Where did the information come from? Is it based on independent scientific research?			
5.	Why does the site exist? Is it selling something?			
Total				

Based on your responses, would you judge this website as a reliable source of nutrition information?