Authorship
Authorship is one of the most important criteria for selecting a site. Who is responsible for this information? Who developed this site? Is the author clearly identified? Upon what basis does the author speak? Is there an obvious bias or slant, or other agenda than simply to educate? Look for a description of the organization that provides the site, or for information about the author, including biographical information, credentials, affiliation, contact information, whether the author is referenced from another authority, and if a list of sources is included. A direct connection to the author or organization allows the reader to question the authority or origin of the information, to provide feedback, and address problems. Is the responsible person or group clearly marked on each major page of the Web site? When you start your search at a reliable site, links to other credible sources are often provided.

Currency
It is important that medical information is current, and, even if the information has not changed, the reader needs to know that the material has been reviewed and/or revised and that it is still valid. Is the update, review date, or copyright date clearly posted showing the currency (timeliness) of the page itself? Check to see that links provided still work; if not, the site may not be maintained. To determine the currency of the information provided, look for dates when the material was last updated. A schedule of updates is important if statistics or other data is presented.

Verifiability and Accuracy
Both authorship and currency are important elements in determining accuracy and verifiability. Are reference sources, including names of individuals, listed in a bibliography? Can the background information of the author be verified? Can the information provided on the topic be verified for accuracy? What evidence is the material presented based on? In addition, what research methodology was used? Information should be well documented, and verifiable from other sources. Note that quantity of information does not always mean quality of information.

Content
What is the scope of the site—detailed or general? Is the information presented as opinion, or it is factual in nature? Opinions and/or advice should be clearly separate from information that is based on research results, or evidence-based. Does it support or contradict other useful sources? What is the site’s policy regarding links? Have the links been evaluated, and is it apparent why they have been included? Some medical sites do not link to any other sites, or link only to those that meet certain criteria; others link to any site that asks for, or pays for a link. Who pays for this site? You should know the source of a site’s funding. Is it through advertising, or, perhaps sponsored by a drug company? The source of funding can determine what information is presented and the focus of the content. How is the information selected, and where does it come from? Is the author or organization the original source of the information, or was it gathered from other Web sites or sources? If the organization or author were not the creators of the information, the primary source should be clearly labeled. Is there a review board of qualified medical personnel who approve information before it is posted? Check the “About this Site” link to help you evaluate the trustworthiness of the information. Note the URL to locate the publishing body.
Purpose
Does the site meet the information needs of the reader? Is the purpose of the Web site stated? Is the site intended to educate or to sell? Who is the audience the site is intended for—the health professional or the lay person? Is the information available in any other format? Does the site complement or merely repeat the other version?

Structure and Design
Does the structure of the Web site allow users to easily navigate and locate the information they need? How long does it take the site to download? Are graphics and sound used to supplement the text, or are they merely decorative? Do the images require a great deal of time to download? Is there a text alternative to the images? Is the format standard, including that for maps and tables, and readable for most browsers? Do supporting pages have a link back to the main page? How stable is the web site? Is it likely to remain on the Web?

Confidentiality and Online Discussion
It is common for Web sites to track visitors to their sites and the pages accessed, and many health-related sites ask the user to become a member or subscribe. The site may require a user fee, or they may select information particularly relevant to the user. The user will, in turn, supply personal information to the site. What is the site going to do, or not do, with this information? A reputable site should describe exactly what will be done with this personal information. Commercial companies may sell data collected from their users to other companies, or they may collect and reuse personal identifying information such as birth date or zip code. It is important that the user read and understand the privacy policy before signing up. If the site hosts discussion groups, it should state the terms of using this service. Is it moderated? If so, by whom? Who has access to membership? It is a good policy for the user to read the discussion for a period of time and be comfortable with the environment before joining.


Commission of the European Communities, Brussels.