

HIV/AIDS INFORMATION ON THE INTERNET:

How to Search and What to Look for

This information, on searching for and evaluating online information, was developed by SciDev.Net. The full multimedia training kit can be found at www.itrainonline.org/itrainonline/mmtk/mmtk_hiv aids_resources_handout.doc. We are grateful for permission to reprint this material.

Searching for HIV/AIDS information will result in different types of information, resources and links depending on whether you are using a general search engine such as Google, or searching a specialized HIV/AIDS site or database aimed at health care professionals.

- General search engine results for a search on, for example, mother-to-child transmission of HIV will yield a wide range of types of resources—ranging from news reports, to community health guides, statistical information and information aimed at medical researchers. You may get good information, bad information, and information which is not relevant to your needs.
- A search on an organization’s website may bring up information produced mainly by that organization.
- A search on a specialized portal will produce results relating to the portal’s particular focus area.

Evaluating HIV/AIDS (or any health-related) information is critically important. The specific evaluation criteria you should apply will depend in some measure on the type of information and what you intend to use it for. Unless you are writing an article on fraudulent HIV/AIDS “cures,” the quality of the information is the central evaluation criterion. Depending on the way in which you intend to use the information you might want to add additional criteria—for example, if you are looking for a good site to recommend to a grassroots organization you would also want to check that the site is easy to use and the resources targeted at an appropriate level. Key issues are:

- **Information quality:** the most important aspect of information quality is accuracy. Sometimes you will be able to assess the accuracy of the information on a website directly yourself. Very often, though, you won’t have the specialized knowledge needed to do so. In this case, you will need to ask a number of questions to help you assess the *likely* accuracy of the information. These questions include:
 - What is the source of the information, and how reliable is it likely to be? Does the provider of the information perhaps have a vested interest in promoting a particular point of view? Look for:
 - A “mission statement” or other information about the organization which maintains the site.
 - Information about individual authors.
 - Sponsorship of the site.
 - Has the information been through an editorial review process? For example, is it in a peer-reviewed journal?
 - How current is the information?
 - How comprehensive is the information?
 - Is the information based on clinical and scientific evidence?
 - Be wary of content which goes against widely held scientific beliefs without proper discussion. This could be an indication that the information is not based on scientific research.
 - When information relates to clinical trials, remember that randomized clinical trials are generally accepted as being the most reliable, followed by other study methods such as non-randomized trials and case/cohort studies.
 - Are adequate references provided, indicating the source of the information, including statistics?

Local, National and International Organizations

There is a vast range of websites produced by local, regional and international organizations around the world involved in HIV/AIDS research, treatment and care. These may be government or non-government-based organizations, who receive private and/or public funding. Websites vary in their content and resources, according to the time, money and expertise invested in production of the website and the intended users.

Information and resources on these sites generally fall into one of these categories:

- Community and media guides
- Reports
- Policy documents
- Background information (fact sheets and glossaries)
- Contact information for expert advice
- Directories
- Searchable databases
- Projects
- Funding for HIV/AIDS-related projects
- Links
- E-mail alerts