Chapter 4

Hierarchy of Health Information

There’s a trick to finding reliable health information on the Internet: Look for the money. Who can pay for medical research and education? Do they want your money? Or do they already have it?

The U.S. government is considered to spend the most money for medical research and education, and it attracts some of the nation’s best physicians and scientists. The government uses tax dollars to create what they call a “goldmine” of health information. And they have gold veins that extend down into research institutions, universities, medical centers and foundations. Granted, sometimes there’s a lump of fool’s gold near the real stuff. Nevertheless, the federal government is most often at the top of the list for journalists who are looking for accurate health data.

Under the umbrella of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) is comprised of 27 institutes that are devoted to medical research in specific categories, such as the National Eye Institute and the National Cancer Institute. To promote health and research, the NIH also created numerous centers, such as the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine and the National Center for Minority Health and Health Disparities.

The NIH institutes and centers provide excellent general health information and facts about current or upcoming medical studies. A list of Web sites for the individual NIH institutes and centers can be found in Appendix A. Go to www.nih.gov, or use this shortcut:
In the Google search bar, type the name of a disease or condition, other search terms and \texttt{.gov} or \texttt{.nih}.

Physicians also recognize the importance of the NIH. I was in an exam room with one of my daughters and listened as the doctor discussed a possible medication for migraine headaches. “Couldn’t there be some serious side effects?” I asked. No, he told me. I felt silly for asking. And then I remembered where I’d read the information and said the magic words: \textit{National Institutes of Health}. “Well, I checked on the NIH site and read that there could be some problems.” He said that the NIH was correct and then elaborated on his earlier answer. His response alleviated some of my concerns, and it confirmed the importance of double checking information found on the Internet.

The path to the federal gold mine begins at \url{www.FirstGov.gov}. It will lead you to government service and information Web sites for many topics. By scrolling to the Health section, you’ll see an excellent overview of the government’s take-what-you-need treasury, including one of my favorite Web sites, \textit{MedlinePlus}. Created by the NIH and the National Library of Medicine, \textit{MedlinePlus} is a resource intended for the general public and the medical community. It has extensive information on more than 650 diseases and conditions. In addition, information about medical facilities and drugs is available. The Web site does not receive money from advertisers or sponsors. A Spanish-language version is also available.

In the Google search bar, type the name of a disease or condition and \textit{MedlinePlus}. Or go directly to \url{www.MedlinePlus.gov}
*Healthfinder* is another excellent source of consumer information created by the government. This Web site provides broad information from government agencies, nonprofit groups, health-related organizations, universities and research institutes. Supported solely by federal funds, the Web site does not have any paid advertisements, links, or advertiser-generated written content. A Spanish-language version is available.

In the Google search bar, type the name of a disease or condition and *Healthfinder*. Or go to www.healthfinder.gov

A few words of caution: When it comes to medical research, money pays for salaries, equipment, supplies and other necessities. But it can’t buy integrity. You’ll learn more about evaluating the validity of medical studies in Chapter 16.

Also, when reading information on government Web sites, remember that no matter how big or important an institution is, people can make mistakes and errors in judgment.

In addition, although much of the information on government sites is current, I’ve heard health writers complain that some of the material needs to be updated. So, look for dates.

Further, be aware that some companies have names that could be confused with government organizations. Words like “national,” “U.S.” and “American” do not necessarily mean that the organization is a government agency. Check further when you’re in doubt.
To find only government sites, in the Google search bar type the name of a disease or medical condition and .gov -.com -.org -.biz -.edu -.net. The hyphen will eliminate Web sites from commercial entities, other organizations, businesses, educational institutions and networks.

The U.S. military uses .mil at the end of its Web addresses. Although they are government organizations, my experience using these sites is limited. Check them out though.

In the Google search bar, type the name of a disease or condition and .mil.

The governments in other countries may provide valuable insight about diseases. Because race and ethnicity play an important role in some illnesses, such as Tay-Sachs disease in the Jewish population, the Web sites of other governments may post helpful information about diseases that affect their populations. For example, if you’re researching Tay-Sachs disease, you might want to check Web sites generated by the Israeli government or researchers.

Also, other national governments have researched topics in a manner not addressed by the U.S. government. For example, in 1978, the German government established the Commission E to engage in extensive scientific studies about the health benefits of herbs.
Web sites operated in countries other than the U.S. contain a country code. For example, United Kingdom, .uk; Canada, .ca; Australia, .au; and New Zealand, .nz. Find more country codes at: www.learnthenet.com/english/html/85tldn.htm.

A list of Web site addresses for foreign government health departments is available in Appendix C.