

# GATOR approach can help surfers to evaluate Web-based health information

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Patients researching health conditions on the internet should use reputable and frequently updated websites and not see online research as a replacement for consulting healthcare professionals, according to a paper in the May issue of the *Journal of Clinical Nursing*.

A research review carried out by a team from the University of Florida, USA, found that 86 per cent of adult [patients](#) use the internet to get answers to health-related questions, but only 28 to 41 per cent consult primary healthcare providers about the information they find out.

"This discrepancy suggests that the majority of users accept web-based health recommendations in lieu of professional advice" says Dr Bryan A Weber, an associate professor from the University's College of Nursing.

"The internet is a wonderful resource if used properly and there are some very informative and reliable health websites available if patients know what to look for."

That's why the team have come up with an acronym - GATOR (genuine, accurate, trustworthy, origin and readability) - to encourage healthy surfing. They are also encouraging patients to discuss what they have found on the internet with healthcare professionals, rather than using that information as a substitute for professional medical advice.

"Some people use the internet to find out more about medical conditions because they find it more convenient, less embarrassing or it enables

them to avoid healthcare costs" explains Dr Weber.

"The big problem is that health sites are not regulated and it is down to the company or individual running the site to determine how accurate, responsible and frequently updated any information is.

"Added to that, the majority of patients don't have the medical knowledge to evaluate the reliability of the advice they are being given.

"We recognise that it is inevitable that the majority of patients will continue to seek [health information](#) online. That's why we've developed the acronym, to help patients to find and evaluate health information while avoiding the negative consequences from trying unsafe recommendations drawn from untrustworthy sites."

The GATOR acronym - short for alligator - provides a reminder of the dangers that people can face if they surf for health advice without sufficient safeguards in place.

## **G is for Genuine**

How genuine and independent is the site? Some websites appear genuine, but are there solely to promote the sale of products that claim to enhance health and well-being or to cure disease. Check whether the goals, purpose or mission of the site are clearly stated and beware of web addresses that automatically redirect readers to another address.

## **A is for Accurate**

It is often hard to tell how accurate a website is, which is why it is vital that patients stick to reputable and trusted websites and check any information they have found with their healthcare provider. For

example, the researchers found simple searches could throw up millions of options.

## **T is for Trustworthy**

Is the information true and is it reliable? Does the website say where the information they are publishing comes from? Do they quote references? Is the information on the site peer-reviewed by an expert in the field to make sure it is correct and up-to-date?

## **O is for Origin**

Does the information originate from a reliable source? For example, most government, academic and healthcare organisations are managed by reliable sources providing up-to-date information. In contrast, a commercial company may present selected facts to sell their product. Can you contact the website for further information, clarification or verification?

## **R is for Readability**

Is the information presented in a clear, concise way that average members of the public can understand? Patients may have difficulty in obtaining, processing and understanding web-based health information if it is too elementary, technical or advanced. For example, a US study found that 40 million people cannot read complex text and 90 million cannot understand it.

"The GATOR approach to assessing health information websites is an easy to remember strategy that requires few resources to implement and can be taught to patients in just a few minutes" says Dr Weber.

"We hope that it will encourage safer surfing and encourage patients to use the internet as a starting point for health discussions, rather than as a substitute for professional healthcare advice."

**More information:** Educating patients to evaluate web-based information: the GATOR approach to healthy surfing. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*. 19, 1371-1377. (May 2010). [DOI: 10.1111/j.1365-2702.2008.02762.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2702.2008.02762.x)

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