

Poor-quality weight loss advice often appears first in an online search

November 14 2014, by Stephanie Stephens



Given that obesity affects one-third of Americans, it is not surprising that more than 40 percent of U.S. Internet users use online search engines to seek guidance on weight loss and physical activity. A new study in the *American Journal of Public Health* finds that online searchers often initially encounter poor-quality weight loss information.

The study reveals that the first page of results, using a search engine like Google, is likely to display less reliable sites instead of more comprehensive, high-quality sites, and includes sponsored content that makes unrealistic [weight loss](#) promises.

"I've watched my family and friends seek out health information, and so

often I think, 'Where do they get that stuff?'" said lead study author François Modave, PhD, chair of the Department of Computer Science at Jackson State University in Jackson, Miss. "Since the first links that appear on an Internet search, regardless of the topic, receive nearly 90 percent of all clicks," Modave observed, "this steers consumers to substandard information."

"Federal agencies, academic institutions and medical organizations need to work a lot harder at [search engine optimization](#) to get their links on top of searches," Modave added. "Consumers need to be more critical when reading online. Ideally, they could read original studies from which many stories are written but, of course, that's not realistic for most people."

In 2012, the researchers accessed 103 websites for queries specific to weight loss and scored the content on its adherence to available evidence-based guidelines for weight loss. Medical, government and university sites ranked highest, along with blogs.

"When looking exclusively at the key dimensions of the global quality score, i.e., nutrition, [physical activity](#) and behavioral strategies, we observed that less than a fifth of websites scored over 50 percent," Modave said. "We also observed that no page covered all the dimensions – the key ones as well as surgical and pharmacotherapeutic options – all at once."

"A major challenge for health professionals is ensuring that the public is accessing reputable information," said David C. Clarke, PhD, of the Department of Biomedical Physiology and Kinesiology at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia. "Scientific evidence is generally considered the best knowledge – but it can be challenging to find, given the way the Internet works and the manner in which people use it. It is the Wild West in terms of information."

Clarke acknowledged the reliability of blogs related to weight loss: "While the study by Dr. Modave and his team highlights these challenges as they pertain to weight loss, his study also provides hope because it revealed that blogs – which I thought would have scored low in terms of information quality – were actually rated highest, meaning that blog authors are genuinely attempting to provide good information."

Clarke continued, "Blogs also rated high in terms of accessibility, which authoritative government, medical and university websites can use as inspiration for improving their design. So I'm optimistic that evidence-based information on weight loss will become increasingly emphasized on the Internet and Dr. Modave's study provides important data about how to make this happen."

More information: "Analysis of the Accuracy of Weight Loss Information Search Engine Results on the Internet." François Modave, PhD, Navkiran K. Shokar, MD, MPH, Eribeth Peñaranda, MD, and Norma Nguyen, MPH *American Journal of Public Health*. Volume 104, 10, pages 1971 -1978 , 2014. ([DOI: 10.2105/AJPH.2014.302070](https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2014.302070))

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