

INTERNET RESEARCH: GATHERING INFORMATION EFFICIENTLY AND WISELY

The medical care we can provide animals and ourselves has improved immeasurably because of the internet. But it's important to remember – anyone can publish a website and anyone can say just about anything they like. Here are some hints to retrieve quality information on pet health care while immediately discarding the bad.

There are two main types of sites:

- Noncommercial (such as that from teaching hospitals, government agencies and foundations)
- Commercial (generally someone who wants you to buy their product). In health care, it is best to avoid commercial sites if possible.

Commercial sites can contain good information, but it takes some training to recognize it. Here is what to look for:

1. *Scientific references* - these come from scientific journals such as the Annals of Internal Medicine, The Cochrane Database, the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, the Journal of the International Veterinary Emergency and Critical Care Society, Journal of Nutrition, etc. Scientific references do not come from newspapers, Time magazine, the Whole Dog Journal, or Cat Fancy.

2. *The references and information should be relevant to your pet* – test tube studies and those in laboratory mice are probably meaningless to a dog in the real world. Human studies are somewhat more useful, but dog studies are best. (And cats are a completely different issue because they are metabolically very different from humans, dogs, mice and most other species we can think of).

Testimonials are not useful at all – they can be ignored!

3. *The people who write articles and formulate nutritional supplements should be clearly identified, along with their training and credentials.* Contact information should be easily available.

4. If information on the site seems extremely optimistic or promises to cure chronic and terminal illnesses, please refer back to #1 - 3.

5. If the site promotes and sells brand name products, refer back to #1-4.

6. *If the ingredients and amounts are not available, avoid purchasing from the company.* “Proprietary ingredients” are secret ingredients, and there is no way to tell whether they may be toxic to your pet.

7. *If the site sells veterinary products,* the company should be a member of the National Animal Supplement Council (www.nasc.cc), an industry group that insures high standards of quality control and maintains an adverse event reporting system. We do use human products for animals as well, but the dose should be recommended ONLY by a veterinarian familiar with the supplement, and not by the company if they employ no veterinarians.

8. *The site should have links to other sites, and these links should provide multiple ‘points of view’ about the issue or condition.* Beware of sites that link ONLY to other alternative medicine sites, or conversely, those that link only to quackbuster sites. Use these other sites to verify that the information you are gathering is fairly well accepted and not the opinion of one well spoken company representative or lone practitioner who only sees a few patients a year!

9. *The site should clearly indicate when it was last updated.* Medical information is generally old after only a year!

Finally, please do NOT assume that consumers and pet owners have access to the same information that veterinarians do. Our professional networks keep us informed of research before it is published, and of breaking news never seen in the newspapers or internet. Please verify your information with your veterinarian!

I can recommend these websites to start your research:

1. Veterinary Partner (www.vspn.org) - database of in-depth articles on veterinary conditions and the conventional diagnostics and treatments recommended. Usually kept very well updated.

2. Healthnotes (<http://www.pccnaturalmarkets.com/health/> and click on the link “Health Conditions A-Z” as well the links “Vitamins, Minerals and Herbs A-Z”). Information about human health conditions and the supplements commonly used for them.

3. The National Library of Medicine (www.pubmed.org). The scientific database of peer-reviewed journal articles published from about 1960-present. You can retrieve abstracts of the studies and occasionally, the full scientific article.

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