

# Making Knowledge Accessible

*Resource center coordinator offers tips for finding credible health information*

By Lori Russell

Whether it is adult onset diabetes, cancer or the itchy bumps of your baby's eczema, with the shock of a new medical diagnosis comes many questions.

What can I expect? What are the treatment options? Who can I talk to who also has been through this?

Thousands of people every day turn to the Internet for answers to those and other questions, according to Linda Stahl, coordinator of the Planetree Health Resource Center in The Dalles.

About 200 people a month visit or call the center to research health information. Most include the Internet in their search.

"When we began at the resource center in June 1992, most of our health information was found in journals and books on the library's shelves," says Linda.

While the staff did obtain information on the Internet for doctors and nurses, she says the searches were cumbersome.

"We had to use a special computer language to narrow our searches and we needed to know medical terminology," she says. "It took a lot of time and effort."

The information the library staff did find often was full of medical and scientific jargon.

While search engines and applications make it easier to find information on the web, the Internet has matured to the point where it can create information overload, says Linda. A search for "lung cancer" results in more than 14 million returns; high blood pressure provides almost 20 million.

"Consumers wonder how to sift through hundreds of returns and tell which are credible," says Linda. "The Internet is a great tool, but users need to be aware of the

misinformation that is out there."

She offers these tips when searching for e-health information:

- Begin by determining who runs the website and is responsible for its content. Reputable sites make it easy.

"Sites like the National Cancer Institute ([www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)) list their name on each page of their site," says Linda.

The federal government's principal agency for cancer research and training, the National Cancer Institute provides information about the cause, diagnosis, prevention and treatment of cancer, and the continuing care of cancer patients and their families.

- Consider who pays for the site. The funding source may affect how neutral or biased the information is.

Look at the end of the website address for a clue. If it ends in "gov" the site is government sponsored. Sites ending in "edu" are sponsored by educational institutes; those with "org" are noncommercial or nonprofit organizations.

Linda cautions consumers to be aware that "com" sites are commercial organizations that may have a product they are trying to sell.

- Check the "About Us" section to learn who is on the site's editorial board and their professional credentials. They are responsible for the content.

More than 2,000 physicians, researchers and educators at the Mayo Clinic provide information and interactive tools to assist consumers in managing their health at [www.mayoclinic.com](http://www.mayoclinic.com).

The American Academy of Family Physicians operates [familydoctor.org](http://familydoctor.org). All of the information is written and reviewed by the group's professional members.

- If the person or organization in charge of the website did not write the material, the original source should be clearly identified.



Linda Stahl points out consumer-focused health information online to library assistant Molly Hamlin.



Linda, left, helps Monika Brink find information from Planetree Health Resource Center's collection of books and journals.

"You need to know whether the information is personal advice or based on fact and research," says Linda. "Opinions have their place, but testimonials are not the same as sound medical science."

- Dates matter when searching for health information. Treatment options for some diseases and conditions change every year or two, as do the medications to manage them. Get current information.

For topics where information has not changed a lot over the years, check that the article has been reviewed recently.

- Read the privacy policy of a website before giving personal information.

"There are so many sites that do not require you to sign up to get good information," Linda says.

- Social networking sites and list-servs for people living with certain types of cancer or chronic diseases can create a vital support network. Just remember that anyone can have access to the information listed on the sites.

"With health care, something new is always coming along," says Linda. "It can be very exciting and challenging to keep

up. I find that most healthcare consumers don't know about valuable websites that offer a treasure-trove of information."

MEDLINEplus (<http://medlineplus.gov>), established by the National Library of Medicine, is one of the first sites Linda directs people to for a one-stop search on health topics, medications, healthcare specialists, tutorials and videos.

The information is current, accurate, easy to read and available in English and Spanish, she notes.

Whatever the source, Linda advises consumers always to discuss the health information they find and where they found it with their healthcare provider.

"People need to become savvy consumers of e-health information," Linda says. "Take as much time to research your health information as you did when choosing the computer you are searching on. It will have a lasting impact on your life." ■

*The staff at Planetree Health Resource Center assists consumers in finding health information online and in the library collection. Visit the center at 200 East 4th St. or call 296-8444.*

## The Search is On

The Medical Library Association ([www.mlanet.org](http://www.mlanet.org)) offers a "Top 10" list of consumer health websites. In addition to the sites mentioned in the accompanying article, these include:

► **[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov).**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offers resources about conditions and diseases in its "Health Topics A-Z" section. Traveler's health offers recommendations for travelers worldwide. Information also is available in Spanish.

► **[www.healthfinder.gov](http://www.healthfinder.gov).**

The Office of Disease Prevention provides links to online journals, medical dictionaries, prevention, self care in English and Spanish.

► **[www.hivinsite.ucsf.edu](http://www.hivinsite.ucsf.edu).**

The project of the University of California San Francisco AIDS Research Institute, provides information in English and Spanish.

► **[www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org).**

Provides easy-to-understand health information about children from before birth to adolescence.

► **[www.medem.com](http://www.medem.com).**

A collaborative effort of the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and other leading medical societies.

► **[www.noah-health.org](http://www.noah-health.org).**

New York Online Access to Health is a collection of federal, state and local consumer health resources in English and Spanish.