

Women's health on the Internet

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There are 11 main chapters in this publication that offer guidance in locating and evaluating Web resources on women's health. These chapters examine women's health information on the Web in general ("webliographies" of information, and the different types of web sites that deal with this subject), while other chapters are more specific, e.g. women and physical fitness, pregnancy resources. The authors are all specialist medical librarians in America, making this publication a valuable resource tool not only to women searching for this specific information on the Web, but to the information worker in the health sciences or related fields faced with obtaining reliable information on this topic.

The interest in women's health grew out of the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s when it was realised that women's interests were largely under-represented in both the medical and political fields. Women use the Internet to find information about diagnosis, treatment and health products, and they also use it to find answers to questions which may be swept aside by their doctors, or which they may be too shy to ask.

In 2000, when this volume was published, entering the search term "women's health" on the search engine Alta Vista retrieved 190 000 web pages. The reviewer tried the same search term on Alta Vista in 2002 and retrieved 776 357 web pages. The Internet is awash with information. Is it reliable information, is it useful, and is it the best that is available? These are questions that this volume seeks to address. The authors have sought out the best from the flood of sites on women's health that were available on the Internet in 2000. Since then new sites have been added, but the best have stood the test of time and are still very relevant in 2002.

Before embarking on a search of the web for information, it is necessary to know what one is looking for. By developing a suitable search strategy a great deal of time will be saved, ensuring that only relevant and reliable information is retrieved. In this volume, the emphasis is placed on evaluating the web site for quality, authority and accuracy of content. There are many guidelines that can be used. A standard one is that which appears in the Selection Guidelines for the National Library of Medicine, MEDLINEplus. Web sites can now be rated and awarded icons or banners that rate the site as "excellent" or "useful". The rating most sought after in the medical field is the imprimatur of the International Health on the Net Foundation.

In the chapter on evaluating and choosing web sites, there is much useful information on what to look for when choosing a site, a good selection of basic sites and more specific sites which relate to women's health issues for specific ethnic groups, and the issues that relate to the different age groups, from teenagers to the more mature woman.

The chapter on search engines is interesting in that it includes the search engines that information workers are familiar with, but also includes specific medical search engines, meta-search engines, and search voyeurs which show samples of search terms used. Women's health "webliographies" are also interesting as these are sites that provide links to other sites.

The building of NOAH (New York Online Access to Health), an English-Spanish site, shows what can be done when different institutions work together. Four New York City partners developed it in 1995 and it has won numerous awards. It could well stand as a model that could be used in South Africa, where the health needs of women are under-served in all sectors. Although the number of partners has grown over the years, it has remained a non-profit site and is entirely funded through sponsorships and grants.

With the great emphasis on exercise in one's health regime, the chapter on Women and Physical Fitness will be of great interest. Although women live longer than men, most of the studies that have been done on cardiovascular disease and coronary heart disease have been done on men, yet women are shown to participate to a lesser degree than men in organized physical activity, they make the promise "to think about it tomorrow". The chapter highlights that these sites can be used as a starting point for information on the various aspects of beginning an exercise routine, from how to buy running shoes, to more clinical questions relating to physical fitness and the prevention of cardiovascular disease, sports injuries and sports nutrition.

The chapter on pregnancy and early parenting has so much information that the expectant mother and new mother need never feel alone. There are mega medical sites, both commercial and non-commercial, that take the searcher through the pregnancy and on to the paediatric sites. Included in this chapter are sites that deal with SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome), and the loss of a child for those mothers who have to cope with this kind of grief.

There are other chapters offering guidance to web resources for caregivers; women and the menopause; and web-based diabetes resources for women. Mention is also made of sites that deal with domestic violence, sexual abuse and specific groups of women, such as lesbians, rural women and African-American women.

Although most of the sites are aimed at women as health consumers, there are sites that look at women's health from the perspective of academe. These are the sites of professional organizations, which offer information that is of value to the medical student and medical professional.

Two years is a long time on the Internet but the information in this book has remained relevant. New sites may have been added and those that were available have grown. Very few sites have changed; NOAH is one that has had a change of address. The reviewer confidentially predicts that anyone who has an interest in women's health or needs information on the topic will find this book extremely useful.

Reviewed by: Norma Russell, Medical Librarian, Nelson R Mandela School of Health Sciences, University of Natal, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Tel.: +27 (31) 260 4373; Fax: +27 (31) 260 4426

Email: russelln@nu.ac.za