

Gone Surfin'

How can you know what online information is credible?

BY NANCY KAY, DVM

When you or a loved one develops a medical issue, chances are you'll be inclined to do some Internet research. While I say, "More power to you!" other medical professionals might roll their eyes at the thought of "wasting" valuable time discussing potentially whackadoodle notions gleaned from cyberspace.

Whether veterinarians like it or not, the Internet is here to stay. What can you do to make your online research more productive and your discussions about it with your vet more palatable?

Here's how to find instructive, accurate, credible Internet information while avoiding "online junk food" – and how to comfortably discuss what you've learned online with your veterinarian in a way that promotes collaborative discussion.

By the way, although I'm a veterinarian teaching people how to better care for their dogs, this information is also applicable to your own healthcare!

So, let's begin. How can you determine whether or not a website is dishing out information that is worthy of your time? Here are some general guidelines:

- Ask your vet for her website recommendations. She might wish to refer you to a specific site that will supplement or reinforce the information she has provided.
- Veterinary college websites invariably provide reliable information. Search for them by entering "veterinary college" or "veterinary school" after the name of the disease or symptom you are researching.
- Web addresses ending in ".org," ".edu," and ".gov," represent nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, and governmental agencies, respectively. They are likely to be sources of objective and accurate information.
- If your dog has a breed-specific disease,

What you can do . . .

- Ask your veterinarian for her favorite online sources of information.
- Take a grain of salt with the information you read on business-sponsored sites; these have a vested interest in "selling" you on their solutions.
- Give your veterinarian some advance warning that you'd like to discuss some information you've learned online. She may want to schedule a longer visit.
- Choose your words carefully when initiating conversation with your veterinarian about your Internet research. Communicate in a respectful fashion that invites conversation as opposed to "telling" your vet what you want to do.



Your dog depends on you to employ credible health-related (and training-related!) information. To do this, you also have to learn to recognize and reject information from sources that lack objectivity or accuracy, or are outdated.

pay a visit to the site hosted by that specific breed's national organization.

■ Avoid business-sponsored websites that stand to make money when you believe and act on what they profess (especially if it involves purchasing something).

■ Be ever so wary of anecdotal information. It's perfectly okay to indulge yourself with remarkable tales (such as how Max's skin disease was miraculously cured by a single session of aromatherapy), but view what you are reading as fiction rather than fact.

As fascinating as these *National Enquirer*-type stories may seem, please don't let them significantly influence the choices you make for your dog.

■ I really love disease-specific online forums. Check out those sponsored by Yahoo (groups.yahoo.com). They not only provide a wealth of educational information, but also provide you with a large community of people who are dealing with the same challenge as you. These members can be a wonderful source of emotional support – always a good thing for those of us who share our homes and hearts with an animal.

Look for a group that focuses on a specific disease (kidney failure, diabetes, etc.), has lots of members, and has been around for several years. For example, an excellent Yahoo group K9 KidneyDiet (addresses issues pertaining to dogs with kidney failure) has 3,391 members and has been up and running for eight years. A large group such as this typically has multiple moderators who provide more than one point of view (always a good thing) and greater round-the-clock availability for advice and support.

Look for presentation of cited references (clinical research that supports what is being recommended). Such groups should have a homepage that explains the focus of the group and provides the number of members and posts per month (the more the better). They may have public archives of previous posts that can provide a wealth of information.

Listed below are three websites that discuss Addison's disease (an illness that can affect dogs and people; John F. Kennedy was diagnosed with Addison's disease). Now that you are an expert on evaluating websites, here is a little test of your skills. Which one of these three sites is worthy of your time and attention?

- ◆ addisonsdiseasebreakthroughs.com
- ◆ addisondogs.com
- ◆ natural-dog-health-remedies.com/addisons-disease-in-dogs.html

I hope you picked website number two, a forum with lots of members that is dedicated to one disease, uses cited references, and has a host of round-the-clock moderators. Website number one relies heavily on anecdotal information. While

site number three presents some useful information, the ultimate goal is to convince you to purchase its product. If you picked website number two, give your dog a hug and yourself a pat on the back!

Sharing with your vet

Now that you are adept at surfing the 'net, how can you comfortably discuss what you've learned with your veterinarian? I happen to enjoy hearing about what my clients are learning online. I sometimes come away with valuable new information, and I'm invariably amused by some of the extraordinary things they tell me; really, who *knew* that hip dysplasia is caused by global warming?

Surf to your heart's content, but be forewarned, not all veterinarians feel as I do. Some vets have a hard time not rolling their eyes or quickly interrupting their clients the moment the conversation turns to Internet research. Who can blame them? They've grown weary of spending valuable office visit or telephone time talking their clients out of crazy cyberspace notions and reining them in from online wild goose chases.

How unfortunate this is! Nowadays, people rapidly and reflexively reach for their keyboards to learn more about their dog's symptoms or disease diagnosis online. It's only natural (and in their dog's best interest) that they will want to discuss what they've read with their veterinarian.

Is there an effective way to communicate with your vet about your online research that is neither irritating to her nor intimidating for you? I truly believe it's possible, but it involves some work and planning on your part! Here are some secrets for success – things you can do to converse about your Internet research in a manner that is comfortable for you and your vet and, most importantly, beneficial for your dog's health.

Finding the right vet

I may be preaching to the choir, but I cannot overemphasize the importance of working with a vet who is happy and willing to participate in two-way, collaborative dialogue with you. Your opinions, feelings, and questions are held in high regard and enough time is allowed during the office visit to hear them. A veterinarian who practices this "relationship-centered" style of communication is far more likely to be willing to hear about your online research than the veterinarian who practices

"paternalistic care" (far more interested in telling you what to do than hearing about your thoughts, questions, or concerns). Remember, when it comes to veterinarian/client communication styles, you have a choice. It's up to you to make the right choice!

■ Let your vet know that you appreciate her willingness and patience in helping you understand how best to utilize what you've learned online.

■ Ask your veterinarian for her website recommendations – those that have already been "vetted." This is a collaborative approach that lets her know you intend to spend some time learning more, plus a respectful recognition of the fact that she is the one who has spent her career learning about your dog's health issues.

■ Wait for the appropriate time during the office visit to discuss what you've learned online. Allow your veterinarian to ask questions of you and examine your precious pup rather than "tackling" her with questions and discussion about your Internet research questions the moment she sets foot in the exam room.

■ Be brief and to the point with your questions. Remember, most office visits are scheduled for 15 to 20 minutes, max.

■ Let your veterinarian know that you've learned how to be a discriminating surfer! You know how to differentiate valuable online resources from cyber-fluff. You ignore anecdotal vignettes and websites trying to sell their products in favor of credible information provided by veterinary college websites and forums that are hosted by well-educated moderators who provide cited research references that support their recommendations.

■ When you initiate conversation about your Internet research, I encourage you to choose your wording wisely. Communicate in a respectful fashion that invites conversation as opposed to "telling" your vet what you want to do. Most veterinarians don't like being told what to do by their clients, and who can blame them? After all, we expect veterinarians to provide a collaborative approach; it's only fair that they expect the same from their clients. Consider the following conversation starters about Internet research:

♦ **Approach one:** “I’m wondering what you think about mixing some canned pumpkin in with Sophie’s food. I’ve been doing some Internet research about diarrhea and this suggestion seemed to come up frequently.”

♦ **Approach two:** “I’ve been doing some online research and learned about the benefits of canned pumpkin. I want to begin mixing this in with Sophie’s food.”

♦ **Approach three:** “I’d like to give Sophie some canned pumpkin for her diarrhea. A moderator from an online forum suggested I do this.”

♦ **Approach four:** “I’ve been following an online forum about canine diarrhea. One of the moderators suggested I consider adding canned pumpkin to Sophie’s diet.

How do you feel about this?”

Which of these approaches sound like invitations for discussion? Which are more likely to be a “turnoff” for your veterinarian? If I’ve done my job properly you’ve selected approaches one or four as more successful ways for broaching the topic of Internet research with your vet. If these are the two approaches you chose, well done! Give your dog a hug and yourself a pat on the back!

In the Internet we have an extraordinary tool at our fingertips. I encourage you to be critical when choosing which websites you intend to take seriously and which ones you wish to visit for a good chuckle. Approach conversations with your vet about your Internet research thoughtfully and tactfully. These strategies are bound

to create a win/win/win situation for you, your veterinarian, and your beloved best buddy! 🐾

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LETTERS FROM READERS

Photographed, but missing from list We meant to include Nutro’s Ultra Holistic dry food on list of “approved foods”

Several of our eagle-eyed readers caught an error in dry dog food review in our February issue:

“In the February 2010 issue, the picture of the approved dog foods includes Nutro Ultra but it is not listed in the article. Why the discrepancy?”

“I see that Nutro Ultra is included in the photo on page 3; its caption says ‘these are just a few examples of premium quality foods.’ However, it’s not included on the ‘approved foods’ list. Can you clarify?”

“I noticed that the Nutro Ultra Holistic food is in your picture, but I couldn’t find

it in the actual list of approved foods. Is it one of the approved foods?”

Nutro Ultra Holistic Select should have been on our list of “approved dry foods” and was omitted by accident. In the process of every review, we seem to lose track of someone! We apologize for the error.

NUTRO PRODUCTS, INC. (A SUBSIDIARY OF MARS PETCARE U.S.) — Franklin, TN; (800) 833-5330; ultraholistic.com	
LINES/TYPES AVAILABLE Nutro Ultra Holistic is available in seven varieties: Puppy, Large Breed Puppy, Adult, Small Breed Adult, Large Breed Adult, Senior, Weight Management.	MADE BY Nutro’s own plants in Victorville, CA, and Lebanon, TN
REPRESENTATIVE VARIETY – Adult formula contains: Chicken meal, brown rice, rice, rice bran, chicken, lamb meal, salmon meal, chicken fat . . . 26% protein; 12% fat; 4% fiber; 10% moisture.	
MISC INFO – We’re not fans of Nutro’s other, lower-cost foods, Ultra Max and Nutro Natural Choice.	

I noticed that Artemis is one of the “approved” dry foods on your list, but it’s manufactured at Diamond facilities. Diamond has had more recalls than any other pet food company. I’m surprised this food is on your list. Perhaps there’s a good explanation?

– Susan, via email

I’m not sure there is a manufacturer that has never made a recalled product, and I don’t think that one or two incidents

should “blacklist” a manufacturer forever. In some instances, following an incident, the facility management rededicates themselves to quality in such a way that their quality control programs become as good as they can get.

And, to be fair, in some instances of recalled products, the co-packer has made a product using ingredients sourced by their client. If those ingredients cause a problem that leads to a recall, one really cannot blame the co-packer. Conversely,

a manufacturer may produce high-quality products for some of its clients and lower-quality, lower-cost products under its own name. In other words, I don’t think that the manufacturing location alone should qualify or disqualify any product from our consideration.

That said, there are so many good foods on the market today, that if it seems that recalls involving a particular facility or company are frequent, there are plenty of alternatives available. – Editor 🐾