

# Evaluating Sources of Veterinary Information on the Internet

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When you are curious or concerned about a behavior or health issue related to your animal, there is a wealth of information available to you.

Online information can be deceptively simple to locate and acquire. Deciding where to look and what to trust can be difficult. Each of us has had different experiences and education. These influence the information we choose, our interpretation of that information and the value we place on it.

After deciding on the information that is valuable to you, it is natural to want to share it with your veterinarian. Veterinarians are trained to locate and evaluate information and then apply it to specific medical situations as part of their formal veterinary education.

The TexVetPets article *[Finding Information on the Internet](#)* provides us with a great starting point and framework. Here, let's delve into more detail.

## **Credible Websites and Authors**

When searching for information online, it is important to look at the website, its context and the credibility of its author.

## **Looking at the Website Address**

The website address is the first thing to review because it can tell you a lot.

Begin with the domain, which is the last portion of a website address before any slashes (/). Colleges and universities, identified by the domain .edu, are likely to contain credible information particularly if they are a college of veterinary medicine. More about that below.

The information after the first slash (/) indicates a specific portion of a larger website. An example of this is the .edu domain for Texas A&M University. The main website for the veterinary college at Texas A&M University is <https://vetmed.tamu.edu>, and the more specific portion of the website for prospective students is <https://vetmed.tamu.edu/prospective-students/>.

## **Types of Domains**

The following information is primarily relevant to U.S.-based websites. Domains can be deceiving, and their meaning has changed over time.

Not everyone may use every domain. Permission to use the domains .edu, .gov. and .mil is restricted to specific organizations. Other domains including .com, .org and .net. do not have restrictions about who may use them or for what purpose. They may be promoting a particular point of view, selling a product or service or soliciting donations.

## **Rules About .edu Websites**

Overwhelmingly, sites that end in .edu are academic institutions and get a strong nod toward being trustworthy. It's important to know that, before 2001, an .edu could mean something different than it does today. Since 2001, only U.S.-accredited postsecondary institutions of higher education have been allowed to register an .edu website address. Some web addresses purchased before 2001 continue to use an .edu address even though they would not qualify to purchase one now. For more information about this, visit <https://net.educause.edu> and <https://net.educause.edu/eligibility.htm>.

## **.com Sites That Are Official University Websites**

Some sites within universities, often the official university athletics sites, end in .com. Examples are the athletics websites for Texas A&M University (<https://12thman.com>) and the University of Texas (<https://texassports.com/>).

## **Other Sites That Sound “Educational”**

If you find information at an .edu website and aren't familiar with the institution, look at other webpages on the website. You may find it is an institution you are not familiar with, or you may find it is one of the pre-2001 websites. Other domains that sound educational, such

as .university, .academy and .school, are not controlled. These sites may be trying to appear educational and trustworthy when, in fact, they have an agenda they are attempting to support. In other countries, different website-naming rules apply.

### **Government and Military Websites**

Sites that end in .gov and .mil are restricted to federal governmental entities of the U.S. The Department of Defense websites end in .mil. As with educational sites, these domains having a restricted use can add confidence to the information they provide. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) are among the government agencies that provide veterinary information.

Also, as with the .edu domain, some sites within the U.S. government may end in .com. An example of this is the U.S. Postal Service at <https://usps.com>. For more information about this, visit <https://home.dotgov.gov>. To see the official public list of all .gov domains, visit <https://home.dotgov.gov/data/>.

### **Other Domains**

Other domains including .com, .org and .net are unrestricted; they are available for anyone to purchase and use. This means you need to think about what you are reading and be a cautious, savvy consumer of information. Be aware that what is written here does not have to be accurate or science-based. It can be an individual's personal opinion.

### **Review the Webpage in Context**

Considering the context of a website is important in determining its credibility. For example, .edu sites have a strong nod toward credibility. However, when viewing veterinary information at an .edu site, is it at a college or university with veterinary programs? Does it have animal science programs? Are you looking at a university publication? Could it be a personal page from an employee or student or from a club?

How current is the information? Can you find the date it was last reviewed or updated? Are there references for claims or statements made on the page? If so, are they references to authoritative resources? These pages may not present the most authoritative information about your topic. You need to look the page critically even though it is an established institution.

### **Who Authored the Website?**

Consider the motivation of the people who wrote the page you are reading. What do they have to gain from you reading their page and using their information? Are they trying to persuade you to a particular point of view? Are they selling a product? Are they passionately supporting a specific viewpoint, perhaps a diagnosis you wish to be true or a treatment you wish to be effective?

How closely you consider the context of the website and the credentials of the author may depend largely on whether the information you are reading is new or goes in a direction other than the preponderance. How do you find information about the author? Do they have credentials after their name? What do the credentials mean? Is there a biography on the website? If so, what is disclosed in the biography (e.g. education, experience, other authored works)?

As you consider the credibility of the author, keep in mind there are credible authors who are not trained in veterinary medicine. I, for example, as the author of this article about veterinary information, am a professional, credentialed librarian. You would not seek veterinary medical advice from me. However, you would seek information advice.

Veterinary medicine, like human medicine, has a variety of people trained to perform different roles. TexVetPets provides an overview of training for veterinarians, veterinary technicians and veterinary assistants. You can differentiate myriad roles by the credentials used after an author's name. Look for these in authorship. In Texas, you can check credentials at the Texas Board of Veterinary Medical Examiners:

<https://www.veterinary.texas.gov/Search/>.

### **Save Time by Evaluating Your Search**

Information you find on the internet can be just as reliable as information you find in print and vice versa. The medium does not add or detract from the reliability, but it can provide challenges.

It can be easier for someone to effectively distribute misinformation and mask it to appear credible. It can be easier for someone to distribute anecdote and opinion masked as evidence-based science. It can be easier to locate outdated materials.

Before you search, think about what it is you are seeking and where it is likely to be located. Let that guide how you search and where you spend time viewing and evaluating results.