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Teen Health Web Sites

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WEBHEALTH TOPICS

Priscilla Stephenson, Column Editor

Teen Health Websites

Carol L. Watwood

ABSTRACT. Teens and their parents are enthusiastic users of the World Web, and increasing numbers of people search the Web for health information. The health-related needs and interests of teens may differ somewhat from adult users, and many health websites are designed to support only adult interests. Good health websites for teens are hard to construct. Many that have accurate medical information are not designed for or written to appeal to younger audiences. Certain sites for older teens have content that may be controversial or offensive in particular settings. Some sites are designed especially for teens, and others are designed for parents and teachers of teens. No single site stands out as being comprehensive. The age, interests, and backgrounds of users must be considered in determining the most appropriate sites.

KEYWORDS. Adolescent Health Services, Adolescent Nutrition, Diet, Adolescent Behavior, Sexual Behavior, Sexuality, Family Relations.

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Teens and parents of teens are enthusiastic users of the World Wide Web and, as a group, are more likely to go online than the rest of the population. Families with teens are more likely to have Internet access. A 2004 U.S. survey of 12 to 17-year-olds indicated that teens most commonly accessed the Internet from a shared computer in a public area of their home (73%). Other sites commonly used were schools, libraries, and friends' houses. More than 90% of U.S. eleventh and twelfth graders use the Internet; of this group, more than half go online daily. Older girls aged 15-17 are the most enthusiastic users and are most likely to search for health information online; 47% reported doing so in 2004 and the number is growing. ¹

The online behaviors of adults and teens are similar in many respects, but there are several striking differences. E-mail, entertainment, and news sites are popular with both groups, although teens use e-mail mostly to communicate with adults. IM (instant messaging) and online games are much more used by teens, while adults do more online shopping and job searches. Teens are less likely to search the Web in a private area, and often use computers with filtering software. Teens may be more often targeted by Internet dangers such as adult sexual predators and marketing scams aimed at younger consumers. Many specific sites and search engines such as Google are popular with all age groups, but sites such as MySpace and Facebook are almost the exclusive province of teens and young adults. Teens are early adopters of new technology, services, and sites of all kinds.

Eight in ten adults have searched for health information online. Middle-aged, college-educated women are the heaviest users of health information on the Web, and

many popular health sites appear to target this group. However, their needs and interests differ from adolescents. Adults most often search for specific disease conditions, such as cancer and heart disease,² and many of the most popular and authoritative health sites are organized to support this type of searching. Teens often look for information on sexuality, relationships, diet, and exercise, according to a sample of suburban New York 10th graders.³ A Canadian study found that information related to school was most frequently sought, and that friends, social concerns, medical conditions, body image and nutrition, violence and personal safety, and sexual health were other common subjects for adolescents.⁴ Sites written by or directed to adults may also require a knowledge base or reading level that makes them inaccessible to younger audiences. In addition, sites targeted at adults may have layouts or graphics unappealing to teens, and they may be perceived as biased, age-inappropriate, or boring.

This “generation gap” in Internet use may explain why harnessing the tremendous power of the World Wide Web to provide health information to adolescents has had such mixed results, but other factors may come into play. The Web’s mixture of the good, the bad, and the ugly is nowhere more evident than in the field of health information. Inaccurate or outdated health information is worse than useless – it’s dangerous. Many useful forms of Internet communication, such as Weblogs, discussion boards, IM, and search engines, have too little quality control. Web sites may be no better; even reputable teen sites often contain advertising or other links to sites with questionable purposes and content. Accuracy is vital, but expert medical writers tend to be adults, not teens, and may not communicate well with younger people. Some of the best sites have input from

teens, including questions from teen users, content authored by teens, or teen editors. In the area of sexuality, quality of content is in the eye of the beholder. Sites considered fair and balanced by some, will offend the religious or political beliefs of others. In the list of recommended sites that follows, some sites have been labeled “controversial” or recommended for “older adolescents.”

SITES FOR TEENAGERS

Cool Nurse – Teen Health, Teen Advice

<<http://www.coolnurse.com/>>

‘This is an appealing, colorful site produced by a nurse educator, stamped with the caring personality of its originator. It includes an extensive section on men’s health. The apparent lack of a formal review board may indicate that statistical and reference information included here is reviewed less thoroughly. The site accepts advertising and includes some controversial material, but it has been awarded the prestigious HON Code of Conduct which identifies authoritative, trustworthy Web-based medical information.

GirlsHealth.gov

<<http://www.girlshealth.gov/>>

Developed by the Office on Women's Health in the Department of Health and Human Services; suitable for girls aged 10-16. This site’s “look and feel” may attract mostly

younger girls. Includes articles by girls for girls, a link for educators, and information on diet, relationships, bullying, and other health and wellness topics.

Go Ask Alice!

<<http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/>>

Classic question-and-answer site, begun in 1993, from Columbia University's Health Promotion Program. Originally for Columbia's students and later expanded, Alice! receives 2,000 queries weekly on "every conceivable health topic" and maintains searchable archives. Questions are answered "by a team of Columbia University health educators, health care providers, and other health professionals, along with information and research specialists from health-related organizations worldwide." Information undergoes standardized reviews and updates are posted. The site's intriguing name "came to a site producer in a dream," and refers to nothing in particular. Writing style and subject coverage targeted to older adolescents and young adults; not appropriate for younger age groups.

SEX, ETC. – A Web Site for Teens, by Teens

<<http://www.sexetc.org/>>

A Web site "by teens, for teens" from Rutgers' Network for Family Life Education, SEX, ETC. aims to provide "honest, medically accurate and balanced information about sexuality." Invites participation from other teens aged 14-19. Major component of the National Teen-to-Teen Sexuality Education Project sponsored by NFLE. Includes a

glossary, blogs, state laws, stories, boards, and a help line. Part of site requires registration. Includes controversial material.

Teen Health - National Women's Health Resource Center, Healthywomen.org

<<http://www.healthywomen.org/healthtopics/teenhealth>>

Straightforward information from the National Women's Health Resource Center. Design and writing are "plain vanilla;" topics arranged in A-Z format more commonly found in sites for adults. Information is written by "medical journalists and editors" and reviewed for accuracy and currency by a panel of medical experts.

TeenHealthFX - Atlantic Health System, New Jersey

<<http://www.teenhealthfx.com/>>

Colorful, began in 1999, co-produced by teens and adults; a perennial favorite. Some local information for Northern New Jersey but also general interest. Teen health, relationships, body, sexuality, emergency help. Somewhat more sophisticated look than TeensHealth; more appropriate for older teens. Answers teens' questions, some of which are unexpected: the site's medical director, Dr. Walter Rosenfeld, admits, after twenty-five years in adolescent medicine, "This website has taught me that I don't have a clue what adolescents are thinking."⁵

TeensHealth – KidsHealth.org, Nemours Foundation

<<http://www.teenshealth.org/teen/>>

Part of the Nemours Foundation's KidsHealth.org site which, according to its producers, is the "most visited kids' health site." Written and reviewed by an expert panel of physicians and health educators. Attractive, readable, makes no effort to be "cool." Suitable for a wide age range; sexual information is less graphic than in sites for older teens. Good site for educational use.

Insert Screen Shot 1

Caption Screen Shot 1:

TeensHealth – a high-quality, physician-reviewed site from the Nemours Foundation.

teenwire.com – Planned Parenthood of America

<<http://www.teenwire.com/>>

English/Spanish sexuality, sexual health, and relationship information from Planned Parenthood Federation of America. Supports Planned Parenthood's mission and goals. Answers questions from teens; online chat. Written in a clear, non-condescending style. Some activities require registration. Some controversial material.

www.iwannaknow.org; answers to your questions about teen sexual health and sexually transmitted diseases - American Social Health Association

<<http://www.iwannaknow.org/>>

Sexuality and sexual health site produced by the American Social Health Association.

Includes parents' section, viewers' questions and answers, glossary, live forum.

SITES FOR PARENTS, TEACHERS, AND HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENTS

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - Adolescent Health

<<http://www.cdc.gov/node.do/id/0900f3ec801e457a>>

This site is a gold mine of reference information and statistics. The parent site,

<<http://www.cdc.gov/>>, has a useful A-Z index and is the best single U.S. source on

health promotion and preventable diseases. Also in Spanish. A topic list includes a wide

range of specific health topics, such as adolescent tobacco use, youth violence, and

asthma in adolescents. Each of these linked pages reports statistics and provides reports

of relevant government studies.

Familydoctor.org: For Teens

<<http://familydoctor.org/teens.xml>>

Authoritative site from the American Academy of Family Physicians. Written and

reviewed by physicians and patient information professionals. Includes Spanish-language

version.

MedlinePlus: Teen Health

<<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/teenhealth.html>>

Still unrivaled among consumer health Web sites, MedlinePlus is information-packed and highly adult-oriented. However, consumers of all ages enjoy its breadth and depth of coverage. Includes Spanish version. An attractive trifold brochure, **MedlinePlus Basics**, at nnlm.gov/nnlm/online/mplus/mptri.pdf , explains MedlinePlus features to the uninitiated. Authoritative information and high-quality links make this a good source for homework assignments. Much of this site is uncopyrighted and may be freely reproduced. Expert reviewed and regularly updated.

Teen Health and the Media

<<http://depts.washington.edu/thmedia/>>

Provides “a virtual meeting place for teens, parents, educators, health professionals, and others who share a strong commitment to teen health.” Funded by the Washington State Department of Health. News, issues, statistics, links, interactive activities concerning topics such as tobacco, alcohol and other drugs, sexuality, violence, body image, and nutrition.

Parenting of Adolescents: Teen Sex and Teen Sexuality

<<http://parentingteens.about.com/od/teensexuality/>>

Articles, news, resources, and surveys – an appealing site for parents, educators, and others working with teens, produced with the familiar About.com graphics and design.

CONCLUSION

In the field of teen health there is no single standout website – the best one to use depends on the age, interests, and cultural background of the users. This list of sites reviewed above provides suggestions for a wide variety of audiences and purposes. Use of health information on these and other sites on the Web requires “critical thinking.” The Web evaluation criteria recommended by the Medical Library Association’s Consumer and Patient Health Information Section has been considered in evaluating these sites: credibility, sponsorship/authorship, content, audience, currency, disclosure, purpose, links, design, interactivity, and disclaimers.⁶ Determining some of these factors, such as audience, is highly subjective. Teens and parents are invited to check out the suggested sites and see how they “measure up.”

Given the growing interest in Web-based teen health information, and the failure of some existing sites to captivate youthful audiences, what will be the future of these sites? For the present, some favorite teen health Websites will likely remain popular. However, in the consumer-centered model of health care, the future “net-savvy patient” is the hub in the center of a wider network of Web-based information resources, including favorite websites, but also encompassing health care providers, “communityware,” search engines, blogs, and RSS news feeds.⁷ Furthermore, new breeds of Web health information may develop from those already in popular use, such as the proposed Google Health portal from the present-day Google.⁸ Tomorrow’s teen will be sure to have new Web-based health resources that are as yet unimagined.

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