

# Untangling the Web

By  
David  
Schardt

Wondering about the side effects of that new drug your doctor prescribed? Want advice on how to cope with a new diagnosis? Should you believe reports that calcium can prevent colon cancer?

If you're like tens of millions of Americans, you're more likely to look for answers on the Internet than to call the doctor. And you're likely to start at a search engine. But type "preventing osteoporosis" into [www.google.com](http://www.google.com), for example, and up pop links to more than 100,000 pages of information. That's just too much to sort through.

What's more, search engines dredge up commercial and non-commercial sites in no apparent order. And it's not always easy to tell the difference (unless you hit a page with a hard sales pitch).

To save you the aggravation, we searched the Web for reliable, consumer-friendly health and nutrition sites. We found some first-class places to start your searches from, and some sites that aren't as helpful as you might think (see boxes). We also found a handful of other sites that are worth bookmarking:

■ **To see what's in any food.** For the calories, calcium, folate, saturated fat, or just about any other nutrient in any of 10,000 (mostly non-brand-name) foods, go to [www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/foodcomp](http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/foodcomp). The U.S. Department of Agriculture has been collecting data on what's in food for more than 100 years. You'll probably make the most use of

## The Best All Around Site



At WebMD ([www.webmd.com](http://www.webmd.com)) we were able to quickly locate top-notch information. A good place to start: the "Newly Diagnosed," "Stay Healthy," or "Living with Illness" buttons on the WebMD Health page. Each opens up a world of resources.

The site is loaded with feature articles, news items, advice columns, recipes, charts and guides, and links to support groups.

Some of the material is written by WebMD, and some comes from experts in the field. (For example, a recent visit turned up a Q&A with weight-loss researcher Kelly Brownell and a guide to prostate cancer by The Cleveland Clinic.)

Advertisements and material from the site's sponsors (who are identified on the Home page) are clearly marked.

the nutrient breakdowns under "Search the Nutrient Database," but the site also contains separate listings of vitamin K, carotenoids, trans fats, and much more.

■ **To calculate your body mass index (BMI).** To see if you're underweight, overweight, or just right, go to [www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi](http://www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi). The site, which is part of the National Institutes of Health, also explains how your BMI affects your risk of heart attack and stroke.

■ **To look up scientific studies.** The world's largest database of published medical research is at [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi). You can

search through more than nine million scientific articles (most have just abstracts; a few have the full text).

■ **To participate in a study.** At [www.clinicaltrials.gov](http://www.clinicaltrials.gov) you'll find which government-sponsored studies are recruiting and what the requirements are. In early 2003, for example, 162 clinical trials on prostate cancer and six on osteoarthritis were looking for volunteers. 📌

For links to the Web sites mentioned in this article, go to [www.cspinet.org/nah](http://www.cspinet.org/nah).

The use of information from this article for commercial purposes is strictly prohibited without written permission from CSPI.



# Less than Meets the

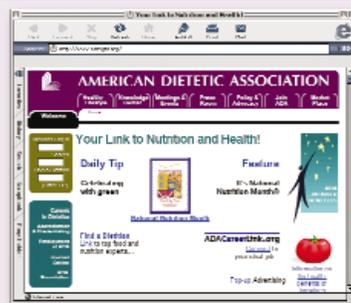


■ [www.nutrition.gov](http://www.nutrition.gov). It's touted as "easy access to all online federal government information on nutrition." While some of its material is useful, much isn't. When we searched for the "Atkins diet," for example, the first document to pop up was an unedited transcript of a three-year-old debate in which Robert Atkins was one of seven participants. The second was a list of 13 links to "Fraud and Nutrition Misinformation," only one of which was about the Atkins diet (and it was one-sided and outdated). And the third was a 1981 U.S. Postal Service complaint against a company for selling an anti-wrinkle supplement (Atkins was an expert witness).

■ [www.nal.usda.gov/fnic](http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic). It may be the place to go to find out what's in just about any food, but for other information, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Information Center isn't what you'd call user-friendly. When we searched for "trans fat," for example, up came a technical scientific paper about food analysis that only laboratory wonks would find useful. The next docu-

ment was a USDA timeline from 1892 to 2002 showing that the agency released its first analysis of foods for trans fats in 1995. While that may not tell you much, at least the information isn't biased.

■ [www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org). "Should you be concerned about trans fatty acids?" asks an article in the "Healthy Lifestyle" section of the American Dietetic Association's Web site. The answer: "At this point, it's not clear." H-e-l-l-o? The National Academy of Sciences has told the public to eat as little trans fat as possible because there is no safe level. That's why the Food and Drug Administration (FDA)



has announced that it will require that labels list the amount of trans fat in foods. What's not clear about that? (What *is* clear is that some of the ADA's funding comes from food manufacturers that use trans fats in their products.)

■ [www.navigator.tufts.edu](http://www.navigator.tufts.edu). This industry-funded site rates hundreds of nutrition Web sites for accuracy, depth, timeliness, and usability.

While the Tufts University dietitians who do the reviews identify some worthwhile sites, they persistently favor mainstream government, academic, and industry Web sites that support the status quo and avoid controversy.

For example, Navigator gives one of its highest ratings to [www.ific.org](http://www.ific.org), the Web site of the industry-funded International Food Information Council (IFIC). Guess they didn't look at IFIC's "Questions and Answers about Mercury in the Environment and Food," which ignores major research showing that mercury in seafood may harm children. And they must have missed the "Questions and Answers About Trans Fat," which stubbornly refuses to admit that trans increases the risk of heart disease.

Also receiving a "Better than Most" rating: the pork industry's site ([www.porkandhealth.org](http://www.porkandhealth.org)), which implies that pork is nutritionally comparable to "white meats" like chicken and turkey and ignores the controversy over the environmental damage caused by the factory farming of pigs.

■ **Phony "Public-Service" Sites.** They're designed to look like public-service sites, and they provide some information about health. But they're really reaching for your wallet. And, in most cases, it's impossible to figure out who's behind them.

# Eye

Take [www.bones-and-osteoporosis.com](http://www.bones-and-osteoporosis.com). The slickly designed site, which appears near the top of Google searches for “preventing osteoporosis,” offers “straight” talk about the disease. But the talk is window-dressing to lure visitors into buying expensive dietary supplements or participating in drug trials run by major pharmaceutical companies. (Recruiting volunteers is a lucrative business.) The only clue that the site may not be public-spirited: At the bottom of the Home Page, in tiny print, are the words “Copyright W3Commerce, Inc.” (W3Commerce of San Diego, California, manages Web sites for drug and food companies.)



Some other sites registered to W3Commerce: [diabetesanddiet.com](http://diabetesanddiet.com), [about-hypertension.com](http://about-hypertension.com), [depression-and-anxiety.com](http://depression-and-anxiety.com), [about-migraine-treatments.com](http://about-migraine-treatments.com), and [preventing-obesity.com](http://preventing-obesity.com). (Whenever you see .com at the end of a Web address, remember that somebody may be trying to sell you something.)

## The Best Sites for Disease Facts

These two sites are stronger on diseases than on foods and nutrition. If you want quicker results on nutrition, start at WebMD.



[www.medlineplus.gov](http://www.medlineplus.gov) is maintained by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the world's largest medical research institution. The site has links to reliable information on more than 500 health topics,

plus access to medical dictionaries, a medical encyclopedia, facts about thousands of drugs, information on alternative therapies like Tai Chi and acupuncture, and

directories of hospitals, specialists, government sites, and health organizations like the American Cancer Society.



[www.healthfinder.gov](http://www.healthfinder.gov) is the federal government's gateway to health information on hundreds of topics. Go to the “Just for You” directory and click on “men” and then “prostate cancer,” for example, and you'll be linked to 20 articles on prevention, screening, and treatment from the National Cancer Institute, the National Institute on Aging, the American Academy of Family Physicians, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the American Foundation for Urologic Disease, and major medical school sites.

## CSPI on the Web



At [www.cspinet.org](http://www.cspinet.org) you'll find articles from the current and back issues of *Nutrition Action Healthletter*; quizzes to help rate your diet and see how much you know about vitamins, fat, and harmful bacteria; information on which food additives are safe or not; guides to help you shed

unwanted pounds, lower your blood pressure, and reduce your cholesterol; and a link to [www.smartmouth.org](http://www.smartmouth.org), our Web site for kids.