



Patient Information Forum

For everyone involved in health information and support

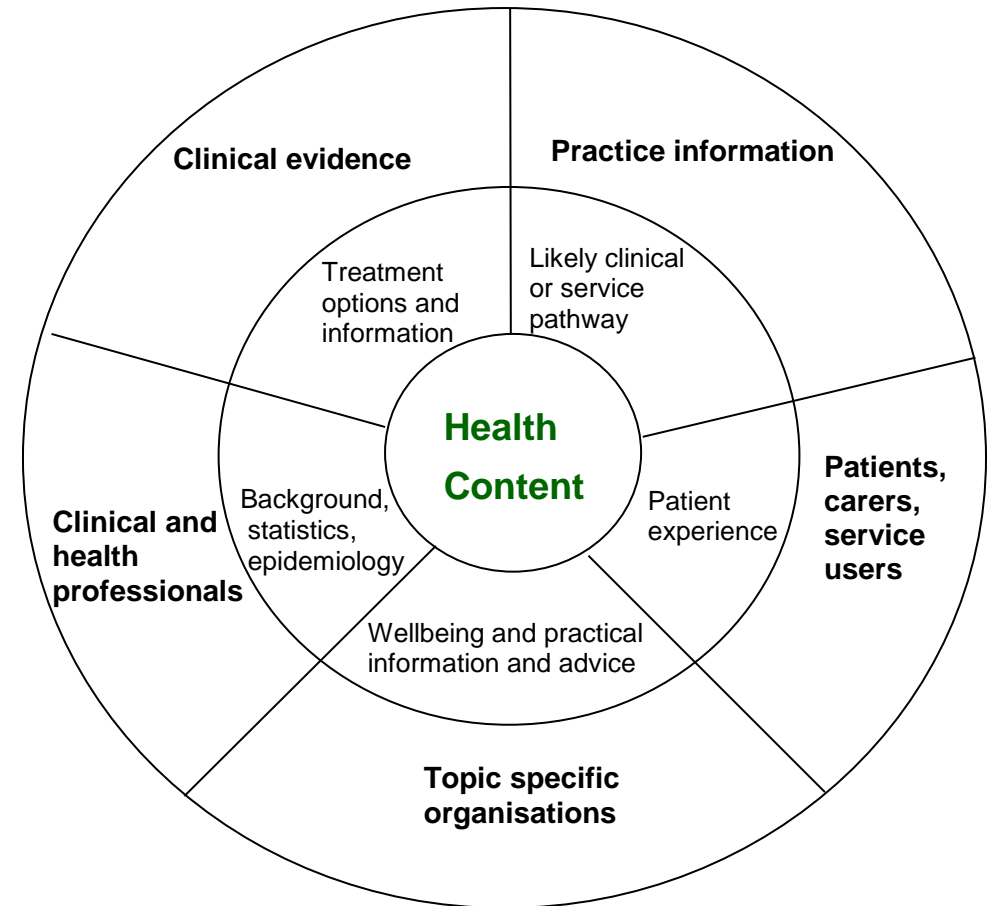
What source when?

Creating accurate and reliable health information, September 2016

If you want to ensure your content is accurate and reliable, the first thing you need to do is look at where you source your information from. But when it comes to producing health content, what is the most appropriate source to use? There's a huge range of information out there, from clinical trials to medical textbooks, professional guidelines to patient information websites.

The truth is, health content is made up of many different elements – and so you're likely to need several different types of information to produce your content. What's a good source for one thing, won't necessarily be for another. For instance, a systematic review is a great source for clinical evidence, but it may not tell you much about current practice, or about the symptoms or causes of a disease.

Read on to find out more about the best sources to choose for the type of content you're producing.



Different elements and sources of health content

Types of sources

Clinical evidence

You'll need to look at clinical evidence if you're discussing anything to do with how well a treatment works. The best forms of clinical evidence are 'filtered' or secondary sources of evidence. They include evidence-based guidelines, critically appraised reviews or synopses of studies, and systematic reviews. These resources appraise the quality of studies and make recommendations based on all available evidence in an area.

Examples

- [NICE guidelines](#)

Practice information

These are resources typically designed for health professionals, which describe the usual clinical or care pathway for a condition, or give advice on what treatments to prescribe. While the clinical evidence can tell you how well a treatment works, this type of resource will give you a better picture of the whole patient journey, and what is actually likely to happen in practice. You may want to refer to these sources to explain what patients can expect during diagnosis and treatment, but aim to use them in combination with latest clinical evidence.

- [Cochrane reviews](#)
- [BMJ Clinical Evidence](#)
- [DARE \(Database of Abstracts of Reviews of Effects\)](#)

If a systematic review or evidence-based guideline isn't available for the point you're addressing, you may need to look at individual studies. The highest quality form of study is a randomized controlled trial (RCT), followed by a cohort study, a case-control study, then a case series. The lowest form of clinical evidence is expert opinion.

Examples

- [Map of Medicine](#)
- [BMJ Best Practice](#)
- [NICE Clinical Knowledge Summaries](#)
- [NICE pathways](#)
- [British National Formulary \(BNF\)](#)

Professional/clinical reference

These resources are often a good source of background information, and sometimes, information on diagnosis/treatment. They may also be particularly good at providing specific detail that may be lacking in clinical evidence, such as details around how a procedure is carried out. Always check the reliability and editorial process for any new website you use (see section below).

Online textbooks can also come under this category. These can be a great source for information on basic anatomy, physiology, symptoms,

epidemiology etc. But bear in mind textbooks might not always have the most up-to-date evidence on treatments.

Examples

- [Medscape](#)
- [PatientPlus \(Patient.co.uk Professional reference\)](#)
- [Oxford Medicine Online](#)
- [Merck Manual](#)

Specialty /topic-specific organisations

This includes professional organisations such as the Royal Colleges and other associations, and health or medical charities. These organisations are experts in their particular field and can be a good source for background information, statistics and practical information and advice about living with a particular condition. Professional organisations may also produce guidelines and conduct independent research or reviews.

Remember, it's always important to go back to original sources when you can. For instance, don't rely on patient information from charities or

professional organisations for details on how a disease is treated; make sure you refer to the latest clinical evidence or guidelines.

Examples

- [British Association of Dermatologists](#)
- [Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists](#)
- [Royal College of Radiologists](#)
- [British Heart Foundation](#)
- [Cancer Research UK](#)

Patient representatives

You may want to include views and experiences of patients in some format in your information. Ideally, you should source this directly from patients themselves – and this will be necessary if you're intending to include patient stories or case studies.

Finding reliable websites to source

Key considerations for websites include that it:

- is not produced or sponsored by a commercial organisation (eg, a pharmaceutical company)
- is the original source of the information (does it give details of who the author is, how it was produced or what references were used?)
- has a robust editorial process, with health professionals involved in the production process
- has up-to-date content, ideally displaying the date the information is produced and is due for review

If using consumer health information, you can also check whether they are accredited by [The Information Standard](#).

If you just need a general overview though – for instance some insight into what it's like to live with a condition, or concerns people have about treatments, you may be able to source this information from patient groups, charities and sites such as [healthtalk.org](#), which focus on patient experiences.

About the author

This fact sheet was produced for PiF by Pippa Coulter. Pippa is a specialist in the production of consumer health content, with 15 years of experience in medical publishing and communications. She has extensive experience in producing high-quality, reliable and evidence-based health content for consumers. Pippa currently manages the health content library at Bupa. View Pippa's profile on [LinkedIn](#).

About PiF

PiF is a non-profit organisations working to improve the quality and accessibility of health information for patients and public across the UK. Our work involves: delivering resources and events for information producers; influencing to raise the profile of health information; and bringing together those interested in the field of health information via the PiF network. You can find out more at www.pifonline.org.uk