

Health Bulletin



Online Health Hoaxes—A Prescription For Trouble

(NAPSA)—Although the content of many Web sites is credible, sometimes there are exceptions.

That's because the content posted on the Internet may not be regulated for accuracy. Unfortunately, some Web sites can actually be a source of misinformation.

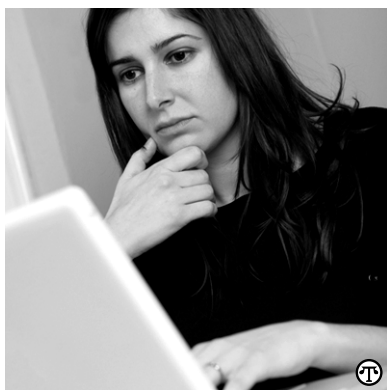
According to registered dietitian Diane Quagliani: "Be sure to check the credibility of any source when it comes to health and nutrition information—especially when it comes to the Web. Acting on misinformation may result in detrimental health consequences."

For example, alarming and unfounded e-mail hoaxes—often called "urban legends"—circulate widely to "warn" people about particular health perils. They include bananas carrying flesh-eating bacteria, cancer-causing antiperspirants and chewing gums infested with spider eggs.

Here are some tips for spotting hoaxes and identifying science-based sources of online information:

- **Question information that makes sweeping claims.** One sign of a hoax is a Web site or e-mail message claiming that one product is the cause or cure for every malady under the sun. For example, a common e-mail myth is that the low-calorie sweetener aspartame causes a range of medical conditions from brain cancer and multiple sclerosis to Alzheimer's disease. In reality, aspartame is one of the most thoroughly studied food ingredients with more than 200 studies confirming its safety.

- **Carefully consider the source.** Scrutinize the source of



Experts say that some Web sites and e-mail hoaxes may actually be the source of misinformation.

information on Web sites and in e-mail messages. Is the source a respected authority or an unknown entity? The basic rule of thumb is to ignore e-mail messages from unknown senders and rely on the Web sites of known, credible organizations.

- **Check out urban legends.** If you suspect an e-mail hoax, visit www.snopes.com and www.urbanlegends.about.com. These sites are dedicated to setting the record straight about urban legends. Along with identifying hoaxes, avoid the temptation to spread false and alarming information. Ignore the urging of e-mail hoaxes and don't forward the message.

Other Web sites that may help separate health fact from fiction include the American Dietetic Association (www.eatright.org) and the American Diabetes Association (www.diabetes.org). For more information about aspartame, visit www.aspartame.org.