Food and Nutrition Information Center
Guidelines for the Selection and Evaluation of Internet Sites

The Food and Nutrition Information Center's (FNIC) Web site is designed to meet the ongoing mission of the Center; to ensure and enhance access to food, human nutrition and food safety information. Internet resources for consideration for inclusion on the FNIC Web site should provide information that is reliable, credible and presented in an objective and balanced format.

Below is an outline of criteria used to assist in the selection and evaluation of Internet resources. Under each category is a list of questions that will be useful markers to define if the site meets the criteria for that category. Use only the criteria suitable to the site, and remember that all criteria listed will not be appropriate for each site. In checking a potential resource, be sure to locate the home page of the site to ensure the quality at this level as well.

I. Quality and Content

$ Content -The site should offer something unique to the FNIC site. Material should be presented in an objective, balanced manner.

- Is the information based on fact or opinion?
- Is the material presented in a balanced, objective way?
- Does the site offer original information or just links to other sites?
- Is the information accurate? Are the sources of information available for the user to verify the accuracy?
- Is the text well written and free from grammatical, spelling and other errors?
- If it is a children's site is it educational or just cute?

• Scope - The subject matter of the site should focus on food, nutrition or food safety.

- Does the site=s content meet the FNIC mission?
- Does the site cover a broad range of the subject or is it narrowly focused?
- Does it include related topics?
- Is the information limited to a certain time period (e.g. a historical site)?

• Authorship/Authority - The author of the Web site should be clearly stated, well defined and reputable.

- Is the source or author of the site easy to locate and well defined?
- Is it from a credible and reputable resource? Examples include Government (federal, state or local), Associations, Foundations, Colleges and Universities.

- Can you verify the information?
- What motivation does the author have for posting the information? Has it been placed to advertise or to support a specific point of view or bias?
- If reviews or awards are available on the site how do they rate the site?

$ Target audience - The intended audience of the site should be included in the FNIC audience.

- Who is the target audience of the site?
- Is the site geared toward professionals, educators, consumers, special groups, etc.?
- Is the target audience of the site included in the FNIC target audience? If not, should it be?
- Does the site meet the needs of the intended users? For instance, if the site is intended for consumers it should be written at that level.

$ External Links - Links available from the site should be reputable and dependable.

- Are the links from the site reputable and appropriate resources?
- Are the links well maintained and up-to-date?
- Does the site list the criteria used for selecting links? Are the links evaluated?
- Can you tell that you are leaving the host site and linking to another?
- Do they link to commercial sites?
- Do the links work properly?

$ Currency/Timeliness of Information - The information on the site should be current and well maintained.
- Is the information on the site up-to-date?
- If the pages are dated, are they current?
- Does the author of the site appear committed to updating the site and keeping the site stable?

$ Commercial Sites - Commercial sites must provide an aspect of nutrition education that is accurate, substantive and unique.

- Is the site credible?
- What is the site selling? A product or service? Look for what's in it for the company.
- Is the nutrition information substantial despite the product or service?
- Does site advertise? Are the advertised products or services reliable food/nutrition products?
- If advertisements are used are they clearly differentiated from the informational content of the site?
- If commercial, is this information available on a government site?

II. Site Mechanics

$ Navigability - It should be easy to find information on the site.

- Is it easy to navigate the site?
- Can you find information easily and within a reasonable number of clicks (usually within 3)?
- Are the headings clear and coincide with the information under them?
- Is there a site map or table of contents which is easy to find and use?
- When on the site, is it set up so that person cannot go Aback@ to a different site. For example, some frames do not allow user to leave the site without typing in another URL.

$ Searchability - The site should have search capability.

- Does the site have search capability and is it easy to use?
- Can the user define or select the search terms?
- Does the search engine retrieve accurate results?
- Are the results from a search easy to download?
- Is the information from the download useable and include complete information such as author, credentials, date of product, etc.

$ Contact Information - There should be a place to contact someone regarding the site.

- Can you communicate with the owner of site?
- Does the site have an apparent comments section, E-mail address or actual address or telephone number for the owner of the site?

- Personal Information – if requested, the site should explain exactly how the information will and will not be used.

  o Does the site ask for the user to "subscribe" or "become a member" in order to use the site?

  o Is a privacy policy available on the site?

III. Additional Features

$ Graphics and Layout - Graphics, illustrations and other multimedia designs should enhance the site. They should not distract the user or substitute for content.

- Do the graphics enhance the content or provide clarity?
- Will graphics load in a reasonable length time?
- Do graphics, video and/or audio add value to the site? Or slow down loading and use of the site?

- Connectivity - The site should be easy and relatively quick to access with a stable connection.

- Is the URL stable?

$ Software and Hardware - The site should incorporate appropriate use of graphics, audio and/or video.

- If the site requires special plug-ins or programs are they available on the site?
- Are the installation instructions clear and easy to follow?
- Can the site be access with standard equipment and software or are there special or unusual requirements?

$ Uniqueness - The site should offer something unique to the FNIC site.

     -        Is the information available elsewhere on the FNIC site?
     -        Does the site provide information in a unique way as compared to other sites in the subject area?
     -        Is the subject area currently of interest and likely to be in the future?

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