

Why Medical Websites Are Losing Search Rankings & What Can Be Done

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You have a great website, and it performed well on Google for a long time. Then something happened. Within the last year or 2, traffic dropped a little, or a lot. Some pages dropped in ranking for important keywords.

What happened? You aren't the only doctor asking that question.



How Google updates impact medical websites

Google uses a complex algorithm to determine the best results for any given query. That algorithm changed constantly, with thousands of minor updates, and several major ones, every year. When the algorithm changes, a top site can suddenly drop off the first page of Google while a previously low-ranking one shoots to the number one spot.

A significant core algorithm update in mid-2018 has such an impact on health and wellness websites that it became known as the [medic](#) update. It did not target the health sector according to [comments by John Mueller](#) Google Webmaster Trends Analyst, in an August 2018 Webmaster Hangout. Yet, the medic update and many since have disproportionately impacted doctors and other medical websites, particularly those in the alternative medicine niche.

If not deliberately targeted, why is the health industry hit so hard? No one actually knows for certain. Google offers some insight, but details of these and other algorithm changes are shrouded in secrecy, because they don't want to help low-quality websites game the system. However, the [Search Evaluator Guidelines](#) (used by Google's quality assurance employees to assess search results) provide considerable insight, as do analytics of affected websites. We will breakdown what is known, and how you can respond if your website is among those hit.

YMYL and E-A-T: the acronyms you need to know

Medical websites are part of a special classification, known as YMYL (Your Money, Your Life). The Search Evaluator Guidelines define YMYL as any webpage with the potential to impact the people's safety, financial stability, health, or happiness. The guidelines further state that such websites are held to higher Page Quality ranking standards.

The next question, of course, is how Google determines Page Quality. One of the primary factors, as

described in the Search Evaluator Guidelines, is E-A-T (Expertise, Authority, and Trustworthiness). All indicators point to E-A-T as the leading cause of declining medical website search rankings.

Mueller elaborated a bit on the struggle of medical websites in some very telling [comments](#) during a February 2019 Hangout, saying that talk among SEO experts about expertise and authority makes sense. He also stated that it was previously difficult for Google to determine the quality of medically oriented websites, but they have gotten much better at it within the past year.

How to up your E-A-T

In theory, Google's focus on high quality in medical information is a noble pursuit, as something most doctors would wholly support. The problem is that "quality" is subjective, and Google might not be as good at detecting it as they think they are. After all, you are a doctor. You have board certification as evidence of your expertise, authority, and trustworthiness. That may be enough to satisfy your patients, but it's not enough for Google.

Let's take a closer look at what considers evidence of E-A-T:

- Author biography – Google wants to deliver quality content. They are less interested in who owns the website than in who wrote the article on any given page. This is especially applicable to multi-author websites, such as blogs. The personal E-A-T of the main content creator is paramount.
What you can do: Add author bios for blog posts and remove low traffic pages that are attributed to non-medical experts. Be sure the website has doctor bio(s) detailing credentials.
- Reputation – Search Evaluator Guidelines recommend extensive reputation research, including reading as many reviews and ratings as possible. A mildly negative reputation in any sector, or a mixed positive/negative reputation in YMYL websites, is considered a low-quality search result.
What you can do: Encourage happy patients to leave reviews. Acquire mentions and link-backs from reputable, relevant websites whenever possible.
- Website security – Topic-specific credentials are not the only sign of trustworthiness. Google makes every effort to avoid sending users to malicious websites, and certainly does not favor ones with lax security. In fact, its own browser (Chrome) flags any website lacking a SSL certificate as "not secure."
What you can do: Make sure that your website uses HTTPS (rather than HTTP), and that your webmaster is taking appropriate precautions against hackers or malware.
- NAP – Here is one more important acronym, which means Name, Address, and Phone number. For a physical business, Google wants contact and location information. Furthermore, that information should be consistent across the internet. You may lose or dilute the authority these links offer if information is inconsistent or inaccurate.
What you can do: Claim and update your profile on Google My Business and other directories. Use the same spelling and formatting consistently. If you move or change your phone number, update it everywhere.
- Expert consensus – This is likely the number one challenge for holistic, biological, and alternative medicine websites. Google has been outspoken about ramping up efforts to [fight the spread of misinformation](#) online. As part of the YMYL classification, medical websites with information differing from the established scientific consensus are caught up in the fallout. The Search Evaluator

Guidelines lists “YMYL content that contradicts well-established expert consensus” right along with fabricated news items and debunked conspiracy theories, as the lowest quality of search result.

What you can do: Double and triple check the accuracy of content, because it can be surprisingly easy to accidentally provide misinformation. If your content is within the alternative medicine realm, clearly acknowledge that your information differs from the general consensus. Present both sides of the issue.

Conclusion

Google holds medical sector a higher standard than most sectors. Best practices in SEO and local search marketing are as important as ever, but they are no longer enough for doctors. You also need to convince Google of your – and your website’s – expertise, authority, and trustworthiness. The key to accomplishing that lies in reputation management and content management.

Naren Arulrajah, President and CEO of [Ekwa Marketing](#), has been a leader in medical marketing for over a decade. Ekwa provides comprehensive marketing solutions for busy doctors, with a team of more than 180 full time professionals, providing web design, hosting, content creation, social media, reputation management, SEO, and more. If you’re looking for ways to boost your marketing results, call 855-598-3320 for a free strategy session with Naren.