

Cyberchondria

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Cyberchondria, the excessive preoccupation with one's health caused by often erroneous Internet information, is an increasingly common malady. With the glut of health-related Web sites available to the not-so-discerning consumer, it's no wonder. Conservative estimates put the number of such health sites at 15,000. According to George Lundberg, M.D., editor-in-chief of Medscape.com, "We expect 35 million Americans at least, to access the Internet for health information in the next year."

One look at some patients and you can recognize what ails them. Their faces lack color – they've been drained by fear, usually irrational. But the real sign is in their hands; their white knuckles are clutched around computer printouts containing what they consider sure-fire proof of a devastating illness. Oh no, another case of "cyberchondria".

Surveys commissioned by The Pew Internet and American Life Project indicate that more Americans turn to the Internet for medical information than for sports scores, stock quotes, or online shopping bargains. Health Web sites are so abundant that the World Health Organization recently proposed adding ".health" to the few existing top-level domain names, like ".com" and ".org" which helps users locate sites of interest.

Information-hungry consumers who surf the Internet to investigate nagging health problems may soon find themselves doing some digging and – here's the dangerous part – self-diagnosing. A recent investigation performed by a group of gastroenterologists concluded that one in 10 gastroenterology-related sites contains treatment information that's "unproven or outright quackery".

Some sites even offer the option of "online diagnoses", in which consumers can type in the nature of their problem and receive a "diagnosis" from a "medical professional". "I don't know a decent doctor who [believes] he or she could do a proper job during an online consultation. To pretend you can and charge money for it is wrong," contends Mark Porter, M.D., medical editor of Surgery Door, the British health portal.

Since physicians have less and less time to spend with patients and the Internet promotes a greater emphasis on self-help, it's easy to see why consumers delve into the readily available health information on the Web for answers to medical problems. And although this pastime is not without its dangers, some say it has its merits.

A movement is underway to create ethical and content standards for health Web sites. Health on the Net Foundation (a non-profit Swiss organization) (HON) has developed a "code of conduct", which holds participating health Web sites accountable to basic ethical standards of information presentation. Web sites that adhere to the HON Code of Conduct contain the HON logo.

Another group with similar goals is the Internet Healthcare Coalition, an international, nonpartisan, non-profit organization committed to promoting quality healthcare resources on the Internet. In 1999, the coalition launched the "eHealth Ethics Initiative", an ongoing project aimed at establishing a set of universal ethics principles for health-related Web sites.

Efforts to make health information of the highest quality available to the public via the Internet are to be applauded. Clearly, however, many sites do not yet subscribe to these high standards. And some of the printouts that patients carry in their white-knuckled clutches may very well contain information from these sub-par sites. We can, however, do some damage control by suggesting to patients that they follow some simple rules when surfing the Net for health information.

A web site that charges for online consultations is likely bogus. There's no way to guarantee that the patient will be communicating with a physician, and no medical professional can accurately diagnose a patient without seeing him or her face-to-face.

It is important that patients go to health Web sites where the information posted is authentic and current, not just advertising paid for by a sponsoring company and disguised as unbiased information.

You should consult the site's privacy policy to ensure prevention of unauthorized access or use of personal data.

Patients who receive Web information, or at least guidance, directly from their trusted physician, will be less likely to visit questionable sites, and we will be seeing fewer cyberchondriacs.

(The majority of this information was abstracted from Physicians Practice® in an article written by Elizabeth Heubeck. She can be reached at ehuebeck@physicianspractice.com)

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(The Joy McCann Culverhouse Center for Esophageal & Swallowing Disorders has an approved list of reliable health websites available on our website. Click Links on the left side bar of the website to view this list.)