

ONLINE HEALTH: CLICK OR CURSE?

The internet has given us unprecedented access to health information. But is that a good thing? David Hughes reports

I'M LUCKY to have finished this article. I mean, considering I have Yellow Fever. The internet alerted me, when I googled in my symptoms of muscle soreness and headache.

They've worn off, but the website warns that in Stage Two of the disease, "fever and other symptoms go away." So there we are. I'm putting my affairs in order, prior to heart, liver and kidney problems.

Cyberchondria

While the internet can be a valuable source of information about our health, it has also enabled countless people to worry about diseases they didn't know existed a few years ago.

While most people use the internet – in health terms – to

help make informed decisions, those prone to hypochondria (not me, obviously) are more likely to find it a source of worry, a phenomenon popularly known as cyberchondria.

The pre-digital condition hypochondria is defined as being anxious about an imagined illness, with exaggerations of symptoms. It can last up to six months, and affects men and women equally.

Arthur Barsky MD, of Harvard Medical School, author of *Worried Sick: Our Troubled Quest for Wellness* says sufferers are "absolutely not fakers or malingerers. They really feel the distress they're talking about. It's just that their feelings don't have an obvious medical basis."

To such people, the internet can be a source of potential worry. "A lot of the stuff on the internet, especially on health-related bullet boards, is pure impression and anecdote, and they don't have a lot of scientific validity," says Barsky – on one of the reputable sites, WebMD.

Domino effect

Not only is some information unreliable, but its ease of access means that researching one thing can readily lead to an escalation of search terms from heartburn to heart failure.

A 2008 study of cyberchondria and search engines amongst 500 employees of Microsoft discovered that nine out of ten reported a search for basic medical information on the web had led to researching a more serious condition.

In addition, the Microsoft study found that internet searchers believed search engines ranked the results in terms of the likelihood of them having that disease. But search engines don't work like that. Other factors are involved, such as the number of times a term has been

searched for; if many people escalate their basic search to investigate rare diseases, that in turn can make those diseases climb the rankings when symptoms are typed in.

Searchers also paid more attention to the information provided than to the source of that information – making it important to focus on reputable websites for reliable health information.

Positive searches

But here's the plus side. With reliable health websites (see 'Online health resources'), and a low level of anxiety, the internet can be a huge blessing for both preventing illness and making informed decisions about treatment.

The Royal College of Surgeons has just issued new guidelines which move away from doctors telling patients

which medical treatments they should have, and instead advising doctors to walk patients through the range of choices and let them decide for themselves.

A well-informed internet search can actually help with that. A Harris online poll in the USA found that patients who used the internet to search for health information were more likely to ask informed questions of their doctor, and more likely to follow prescribed treatment.

The best health websites now offer opportunities to find in-depth information

about specific illnesses, with up-to-the minute news of new advances in treatments that can be discussed with your doctor.

I had experience of this myself a few years ago when facing hospital treatment, and found details online of an alternative, less damaging option that was currently only available in the USA. My doctors then broached the subject of the same treatment, saying it was becoming available in the UK and would I like to try it? To their surprise, I agreed immediately, having already read up on the research from the US.

There are also sources of information about natural

Do you have cyberchondria?

- You check online for symptom information from up to one to three hours per day
- You fear having several different diseases
- On your worst day, you've checked three to four times
- Looking online to get symptom information makes you feel more anxious
- Your health is actually medically stable

From a study by Emily Doherty-Torstrick and colleagues at the New York State Psychiatric Institute. If these situations apply to you, the Doherty-Torstrick research team recommends you stop checking online. It says "checking online for reassurance by an individual with high levels of illness anxiety does more harm than good."

therapies that may help where conventional treatment might offer little hope (the website (www.thetruthaboutcancer.com) is particularly comprehensive in this field).

The other big advantage online health sites offer is the opportunity to see and hear from others with the same medical conditions, both to learn what worked for them and to lessen a sense of isolation.

One of the foremost here is (www.healthtalk.org), managed by Oxford-based charity DIPEX. Healthtalk aims to help and inform patients, carers and healthcare professionals by



sharing trustworthy, personal health experiences.

Its patron, MP Norman Lamb, health spokesman for the Liberal Democrats, says: "Making sure that people have access to the best possible information about health conditions affecting them, their families and friends, is of the utmost importance."

"By being able to see and hear people sharing their personal stories, Healthtalk can make an enormous difference by improving understanding, tackling myths and mysteries around certain conditions, and helping people to take control of their healthcare."



Online health resources

Reputable health website include:

- **WebMD:** Includes a symptom checker, Q&A on prescription drugs, vitamins and other medical questions, and latest medical news stories. (www.webmd.com)
- **NHS Choices:** The UK's biggest health website. High-quality information on more than 800 health conditions, a guide to the science behind health news stories, lifestyle and prevention advice, a body map linked to treatments and conditions, and a GP finder service. (www.nhs.uk)
- **HealthTalkOnline:** Ranked no two in The Times' top five health websites, this offers, according to the Royal Society of Medicine, a high quality evidence-based approach to research and patient feedback. Includes sections on mental health, clinical trials, chronic pain, cancer, and carers of people with dementia. (www.healthtalk.org)
- **Patient UK:** Nominated for this year's Website of the Year Award, this is an online resource of "trusted medical information and support," written by doctors. Includes videos and slide shows, information about medicines and clinical trials, a symptom checker, and articles on well-being, fitness, weight balance and anxiety. (www.patient.info)
- **Medhunt:** Run by the Health on the Net Foundation, this is a search engine pooling results from health websites that meet its strict code of conduct, which is described as "the most widely used and best trusted ethical code for health/medical websites." (www.hon.ch/MedHunt).