87% OF *MARIE CLAIRE* READERS ADMIT THEY'VE USED THE INTERNET TO RESEARCH HEALTH SYMPTOMS*

CYBERCHONDRIACS ANONYMOUS

Whether your family doctor is WebMD or you like to Google before popping a Panadol, more of us are turning to the internet for health information. But is it safe or a symptom of something more serious? Nicole Partridge gets the real diagnosis on researching online

After quietly closing the door to her home office, Annie, a mother of two from Sydney's north-west, ran over to her computer and feverishly typed the words "reddish mole" into Google. Within seconds, a long list of websites appeared. Staring intently at the screen, her heart racing, she examined each of the blurbs: "What is melanoma?" read one site. "Symptoms of skin cancer," stated another. Scrolling down the page, her anxiety only got more pronounced. "It's probably already spread to my lymph nodes – I could be dying," she pondered. As she shut down the computer, panicky ideas started swirling. "Who will take care of my children? Who will my husband marry when I'm gone?"

Annie is part of the growing phenomena known as "cyberchondria" – a term coined by a British journalist to describe the act of researching medical conditions on the internet,

which lead to a worst-case scenario. For most searchers, a consultation with Dr Google can provide answers to common conditions: confirming your child has chickenpox, or that a skin irritation is in fact psoriasis. But for others, like Annie, an internet diagnosis is a slippery slope, fuelling already anxious thoughts.

"The issue with cyberchondria is the fact that the patient is already anxious, as opposed to someone who Googles and thinks, 'I've just got this symptom and I'm going to see what it is,'" explains Sydney-based GP Dr Sharmini Mendis, who has observed an increase in the number of patients who come armed with information from the internet.

"In my experience, the patient with cyberchondria has an underlying threshold of anxiety and would already be thinking their symptoms are sinister. Searching online would just exacerbate this," she adds, citing the example of one patient who came to see her recently, worried her daughter's tiredness might be a life-threatening illness.

Even for those not preoccupied by their health, searching for symptoms can lead to worry. In a 2008 study looking at the internet habits of more than a million

PITFALLS OF ONLINE DIAGNOSIS

We put the cyberchondriac search to the test by typing the words "headache" and "light-headed" into Google. Here's a small sample of the list of possible illnesses that resulted:

- Tiredness.
- Blood clot on the lung.
- Migraine.
- Brain tumour.
- Optic neuritis (inflammation of the optic nerve in the eye).
- Low blood pressure.
- Degenerative spine disease.
- Depression.
- Hypoglycemia.
- Brain stem injury.
- Stroke.
- Underactive thyroid.
- Hypoxaemia (low blood oxygen).
- Anaemia.
- Premenstrual tension (PMT).
- Pregnancy.
- Panic attacks.
- Lyme disease.
- Meniere's disease (inner ear disorder).

users, researchers at Microsoft found self-diagnoses by search engine can lead people to believe that common symptoms, like a headache, are the result of a serious illness, such as a brain tumour, ▶

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> Dr Wayne Usher, medical researcher at Griffith University

or chest pain is heart disease – when it might just be old-fashioned indigestion.

As it turns out, worrying about being sick can actually make you ill. From fatigue to a weakened immune system, studies have shown stress has serious health implications. Oh, and you won't live as long. "Overall, someone who languishes, who is pessimistic and who worries may live 10 years less than people who are flourishers," explains Professor Gordon Parker, executive director of the Black Dog Institute. But don't log off just yet – it is possible to make the most of online resources without stressing out.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

"The problem with online diagnoses is that I don't think computers have risen to the diagnostic challenge," says Dr Steve Hambleton, federal vice president of the Australian Medical Association. "If you type 'headache' into the system, it quite rightly gives you thousands of possibilities. The real skill in diagnosing a patient's condition is being able to combine observation, examination and historical information – skills GPs learn by experience that you can't get over the internet."

With conservative estimates suggesting that there are now more than 100,000 health-related sites, searching the internet for answers has never been easier – or more questionable. "Researching can be OK if it is complemented with a degree of scepticism," explains Dr Wayne Usher, a health researcher at Griffith University, Brisbane. "Certainly, the internet should not be taken on its own merit without professional medical knowledge," he adds. "But this is what people are doing – getting information on the web; then challenging

their doctor on diagnosis, treatment and drugs, which can be a source of frustration for the health professional."

VITAL SITES

Don't avoid the internet for fear of irritating your doctor – most GPs concede it has its place. Technology now makes it possible to easily manage chronic diseases like diabetes by recording blood sugar levels and insulin intake, as well as general health – like the iPhone apps that track your menstrual cycle, and monitor your heart. Medical centres, particularly in the US, are using Twitter to stay in touch with patients. Even the World Health Organization has jumped on the bandwagon, tweeting updates around the globe. "Social media will have a greater impact in the years to come on the healthcare system," says Dr Usher.

Meanwhile, for those chronic Googlers, start refining your search. According to Dr Lynn Weekes, CEO of the National Prescribing Service, there are a few key things to keep in mind when you Google health concerns:
● Be wary of sites that simply exist to sell a product or service.
● Use Australian websites when looking for information about specific medicines, as product names vary across countries.
● Check the information is up to date, as medical research is constantly evolving. Good websites will say when its pages were last updated.
● Look for sites promoted by HealthInsite or the Health on the Net Foundation.

"It's good to be proactive with healthcare," stresses Dr Usher, "but do it in consultation with your GP, who will ultimately be able to offer peace of mind."

ARE YOU A CYBERCHONDRIAC?

Jonathan Gaston, director of the Emotional Health Clinic at Macquarie University, Sydney, believes there's a fine line between research and fixation. "People need to ask themselves: 'Is it starting to impact on other aspects of my life? Or, is it reducing the quality of my life in some way?'" If the answer is yes, then anxiety issues could be at play.

"People with health anxiety are often hyper-vigilant and will be constantly looking for aches and pains," adds Gaston. "I suspect a lot of people get on to the internet to try to feel more reassured, to feel more in control, but the very act of immersing themselves in all that information often heightens their worry and anxiety." The message? Get off the computer and in to see a professional. ■

HOW TO LOG OFF

1 Focus on being in the moment – living in the present, not worrying about the past or fearing the future.

2 Try some positive self-talk – if symptoms are worrying you and your experience says that you have been through tests before and it all worked out, chances are you are OK.

3 Face the fear; not by visiting the internet or doctor, advises Gaston, but by acknowledging that you have a problem and taking small steps to overcome the worry by gradually reducing the amount of time spent on the internet.

4 If Googling is disrupting your life and wellbeing, talk to your GP, who can refer you to an anxiety specialist.