

Many turn to the Web for medical advice

by Beth Wood

Are you a "cyberchondriac"? If you have ever typed in a disease or condition into a search box on the Internet, you qualify.

A SITE FOR SORE - Many people turn to medical Web sites for health information and advice. CNS Illustration by Jacie Landeros. But don't take offense. According to survey-takers at the Harris Poll, a "cyberchondriac" is simply anyone who uses the Web to obtain health-related information.

Whether you've got a sore throat, tonsillitis or even throat cancer, looking on the Web for information about your health has been getting easier over the last few years. And more and more Americans are taking advantage of it.

A 2007 Harris poll disclosed that of the 225 million adults in the United States, an estimated 160 million have searched for health information online, up 37 percent from 2005. That's triple the 54 million in 1998, the year of the first Harris poll about health-related Web-searching.

The Pew Internet and American Life Project reported this month that 86 percent of Internet users living with a disability or chronic illness have searched online for information about at least one of 17 health topics, compared with about 79 percent of Web users with no chronic conditions.

Some big Internet honchos have more than noticed the burgeoning population of "cyberchondriacs" or e-patients, as Pew refers to them. Microsoft actually launched its HealthVault in October. Google named its planned site "Weaver," and AOL founder Steve Case called his current, evolving site, www.revolutionhealth.com.

In the meantime, how do the 160 million adult "cyberchondriacs" (plus computer-savvy kids) find medical

information on the Internet?

"Realistically, people probably go to Google," said Kathy Quinn, director of the Dr. William C. Herrick Community Health Care Library in La Mesa, Calif. "One great thing about Google is that it has created a health co-op, which means it has partnered with organizations knowledgeable in health, like the CDC, the Medical Library Association and the Mayo Clinic.

"Now when you do a search in Google, the first results should link you to reputable sites. That's a change and a nice improvement in Google."

But Google, Yahoo, MSN's Live Search and any number of other search engines still come up with a mix in their results, so that "cyberchondriacs" have to sort out reliable from bogus sources.

"One of the best places on the Web for consumers is MedlinePlus, which is run by National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health," Quinn said. "The information is written in layperson's language. You can search on a topic or you can click on suggested topics, which have prepared information. That page will give a brief description of the condition and many links to credible organizations. MedlinePlus isn't well-known by the average person, but it should be."

And what about the popular WebMD, which has many of the same features?

"WebMD is probably better known," she acknowledged. "One difference between the two is that WebMD takes advertisements. That doesn't necessarily mean it's biased, but you do have to take that fact into account and ask how the information is supported. MedlinePlus is a government entity, so it's already paid for by your taxes."

MedlinePlus is among the sites deemed "most useful" by The Medical Library Association, a nonprofit, educational group of health sciences information professionals.

Using these recommended sites means you can breathe easier, because you know the information is current and the goals educational rather than commercial. When venturing to search engines like Google and Yahoo, it's wise to keep this mind.

Here are some cautionary steps you should take when surfing the Web for health-related information:

Look at the date - medical information changes rapidly.

Make sure articles provided on a site are written by reputable health professionals.

Check to see if you're looking at a government, nonprofit or commercial site.

Be wary of sites trying to solve your medical problem by selling their products.

Avoid material with vast generalizations - consider your age, ethnicity and gender as you are sifting through medical information.

Use more than one site - even a good one can have mistakes or outdated information.

Always consult with a health professional before taking any action.

Many sites - from www.revolutionhealth.com and www.about.com Health to Mayo Clinic's site - offer symptom checkers. In some, you click on a symptom; in others, you click on a body part from a diagram. Symptom checkers can be handy and quick, but they always should be used in addition to, rather than instead of, consultation with a medical expert.

The last point is crucial, no matter what sites you use. Remember that even a few hours reading about a particular condition doesn't equal a medical professional's years of education and experience.

"People want information before they go to the doctor and after the doctor's appointment," Quinn said. "If the doctor says you have X (ailment) and doesn't have a lot of time to explain the diagnosis or tell you what the options are, you'll want to do some searching on your own. But the caveat is one should always speak to a doctor, nurse or pharmacist. They need to be part of the process."

Another part of the process can be books. Remember those? At what point does one power down the computer and go to the library?

"In the corporate world, there's a 15-minute rule: 'If you can't find it on the Web in 15 minutes, call the library,'" Quinn said. "But I'm not sure that applies for people at home. Everyone has their own tolerance level. But people need to know that libraries can help."

Quinn recommends any public library or one like hers, which specializes in health information. The Herrick

Library (www.herricklibrary.org) is open to the public with skilled information professionals ready to help; library cards are issued only to residents of Grossmont Healthcare District.

"If you're not finding anything, go to the professional. Or if you are overwhelmed by the amount of information, a librarian can help you filter through all that."

FINDING A SITE

With the proliferation of medical-related Web sites, it's hard to know where to go and whom to trust. This list should help - choose the ones that seem best suited to your personality and research needs. The first five are from the "top 10 most useful sites" selected by The Medical Library Association, a nonprofit, educational group of health sciences information professionals. The others are our picks for "cyberchondriacs" (people seeking health information on the Web).

- www.familydoctor.org

This well-organized site has an A-Z index of conditions, easy-to-understand descriptions and diagrams, a guide to over-the-counter medications, and a section posing medical facts vs. myths.

- www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus

The home page of MedlinePlus is nicely organized and offers choices like an encyclopedia, current news and more than 700 health topics. It features clear and simple diagrams.

- www.healthfinder.gov

Federal agencies, led by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, developed this site for consumers. While it doesn't provide descriptions of conditions or treatments, it offers links to carefully selected Web sites from more than 1,500 health-related organizations.

- www.kidshealth.org

Created in 1995 by the nonprofit Nemours Foundation's Center for Children's Health Media, this site is family-oriented. Its home page has three entry points: Parents, Kids and Teens. They have lively, attractive designs and levelheaded language appropriate to each target group.

- www.mayoclinic.com

The prestigious Mayo Clinic offers a site with an A-Z list of diseases and conditions, as well as a search box. Explanations are in fairly clear layman's language.

- www.cdc.gov

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offers a site as vast as the agency itself. A fascinating and trustworthy site to browse, the home page gives several layers of choices. Its alphabetical index and search box can help you find something quickly.

- www.health.nih.gov

The National Institutes of Health provides similar, if not quite as much, information and links to Medlineplus, which it maintains.

- www.nccam.nih.gov

This NIH site covers, in English and Spanish, a variety of medical alternatives and related clinical trials.

- www.everydayhealth.com

A commercial site with ads prominently displayed on its home page, Everyday Health has health and drug indexes. It offers tools like meal planners and weight, calorie and glucose trackers and calculators. Some tools require (free) registration.

- www.about.com/health

If you already use about.com and you're accustomed to its ads and sponsored links, you'll like its health site. A couple of its best features are the "most popular" topics and a drug-finder.

- www.safemedication.com

Speaking of drug-finders, this easy-to-use site is sponsored by the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists.

FOR YOUR LIBRARY

Whether you're waiting for a call from the doctor or you're just curious about an ailment, you will probably head for your computer. But books are still excellent resources.

Here are a handful of the many trustworthy and helpful publications available. Several were suggested by Kathy Quinn, director of the Herrick Health Care Library in La Mesa, Calif. Most can be found there or in your public library. Depending on what you and your family need, consider some for your bookshelf at home.

"Complete Guide to Symptoms, Illness & Surgery," H. Winter Griffith, Stephen Moore, Kenneth Yoder, Mark Pederson (Illustrator) (5th ed. 2006) This respected and simple-to-use guide costs about \$25 and can help in self-diagnosis and treatment for many conditions. If you're ill, you'd probably rather reach for it at home than go to the library (but don't skip calling the doctor).

"American Medical Association Family Medical Guide," (4th ed. 2004) One of many top-notch consumer-oriented medical reference books, this popular and respected guide costs less than \$50.

Medical reference books by the Mayo Clinic and Harvard Medical School offer many reasonably priced, easy-to-understand guides on myriad topics. Check the library for them or search in Google on "Mayo Clinic" or "Harvard Health Publications."

"Taking Care of Your Child: A Parent's Illustrated Guide to Complete Medical Care," Robert H. Pantell, James F. Fries, Donald M. Vickery (7th ed. 2005) This comprehensive guide (in the \$20 range) covers child rearing from pregnancy to school age and includes a wide range of topics, from thumb-sucking and working with the doctor to helping your child deal with schools, divorce and disasters.

"Complete Guide to Prescription & Nonprescription Drugs," H. Winter Griffith and Stephen Moore (revised, 2007) A best-seller in previous editions, this is generally considered a reliable reference to medications and costs less than \$15.

"Gale Encyclopedia of Alternative Medicine," Jacqueline L. Longe, editor (2nd ed. 2005) If you're interested in alternative medicine, this is your one-stop source at the library (the four-volume set is too pricey for average home use). Medical professionals have written the entries in easy-to-read language.

"The Duke Encyclopedia of New Medicine: Conventional and Alternative Medicine for All Ages," The Duke Center for Integrative Medicine, Richard Liebowitz, Linda Smith and Tracy Gaudet (2006) Thorough for its size and price (less than \$30), this is a good candidate for your bookshelf. Nicely illustrated and well-organized, it combines conventional and alternative perspectives.

"The Complete Guide to Nutritional Health: More Than 600 Foods and Recipes for Overcoming Illness and Boosting Your Immunity," Pierre Jean Cousin and Kirsten Hartvig (2005) Running about \$45 in paperback, this book provides healthy recipes and information on the healing properties of food.

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