



Doubting Dr. Google

A little medical knowledge can be a dangerous thing, which makes the Web a virtual minefield

BY LAURA ROBERSON
PHOTOGRAPH BY TRAVIS RATHBONE

MARK HAD BEEN FEELING UNUSUALLY THIRSTY FOR A FEW DAYS.

It was probably nothing, but he decided to see his M.D. anyway. And why not? There's no wait and no co-pay with Dr. Google. Within seconds, Mark had a diagnosis: diabetes. Or, wait, hyperthyroidism. Or kidney failure?! Now he *really* needed a drink....

There's no Mark. But there are many guys who, like Mark, suffer from cyberchondria—*anxiety about everyday symptoms that escalates after browsing the Web.* “Commonly searched sites, like WebMD, often lack depth,” says Kathryn Greene, Ph.D., a health communication professor at Rutgers University. “That can be okay for very general info. But if you're looking up, say, tingling hands, these sites can lead to very alarming perceptions.”

It's time to stop scaring yourself sick. If the Web is a wilderness of health information, consider this story your compass.

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Percentage of men's Web searches for information on common symptoms or conditions that lead them to read about serious illnesses

Source: American Medical Informatics Association Annual Symposium Proceedings



CHALLENGE 1

SEARCHING FOR HEALTH INFO

Your laptop is missing more than a lab coat. "The Internet lacks the diagnostic reasoning that goes on in a doctor's head," says Eric Horvitz, M.D., Ph.D., a scientist at Microsoft Research. A search engine can't prioritize pages that will calm you down over those that will freak you out; in fact, panic-inducing articles often rank higher in Web searches. "There's more written about rare, scary things—such as headache as a sign of brain tumor—than common, boring things, like headache from caffeine withdrawal," says Dr. Horvitz. So...

SAY GOODBYE TO GOOGLE

Shift your browsing to Medline-Plus, a site sponsored by the National Institutes of Health. "Search engines with credible content curated by experts provide coverage that's more balanced than that of general search engines," says Dr. Horvitz. For example, type "chest pain" in MedlinePlus, and "heart attack" will be among the top results, but so will "heartburn" and "sore muscles." That matters, because the first information you encounter may strongly influence your self-diagnosis, says Virginia Kwan, Ph.D., a psychologist at Arizona State University. "It's

tough to overcome your first impression. You may use whatever you read from that point on to support what you think you have."

RACK YOUR BRAIN

If you're searching by symptom, don't just type in your current complaint. "Pay attention to pre-existing problems too," says Greene. "If you know you have a family history of an illness or if you've always had, say, a slightly elevated heart rate, include that in your search." In this sense, the Internet is like an internist: The more information you can provide, the greater your odds of an accurate diagnosis.

STEP AWAY FROM THE KEYBOARD

Ask yourself: *Do I want answers or just reassurance?* "People often search the Internet to cope with fear," says Greene. This may lead you to draw serious conclusions based on general symptoms. Gain perspective by sharing your fears with a significant other or friend. In a new Hong Kong study, people were able to assess others' risk of serious conditions more accurately than their own. Still obsessing over imagined ills? Visit your doctor. "We see great disruption in some people's lives," says Dr. Horvitz. "It may be better to see a doctor early on than to continue engaging the Web with anxiety."

CHALLENGE 2

FINDING A RELIABLE HEALTH BLOG

There are certain things you expect a doctor to write for you: prescriptions, a treatment plan, a note for your boss. But a blog? No way, says Greene. "Blogs aren't for reading about competing treatments, new drug trials, or even physician perceptions." What they *are* for is support for the emotional aspects of your diagnosis. "Does your doctor really understand what it's like to have your condition?" asks Edward Miller, Ph.D., a professor of public policy at the University of Massachusetts and coauthor of *Digital Medicine*. "Blogs provide access to other people who are experiencing what you're experiencing." Your three-step Rx:

FOLLOW A TRAILBLAZER

The ideal blog is one written by a patient who's at least one step ahead of you in treatment. "This can give you a sense of what to expect next," says Miller. As Greene puts it, "These are the people who can answer questions like, 'How is this going to affect my relationship with my wife? Will I still be able to play soccer with my kids?'" To find a relevant blog, search for your condition at google.com/blogsearch.

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LEAVE THE LURKING TO OTHERS

Once you start following a blog, don't hesitate to engage. "Blogs give you the ability to share your experiences with others," says Miller. "That's cathartic and also very empowering." Research shows journaling can encourage people to take control of their own care, and interacting online may offer a similar benefit, say Tufts University researchers.

CHECK YOUR EXPECTATIONS

No matter how connected you eventually feel, remember that the blogger is neither your doctor nor your double; another person's experience will never be a perfect parallel to your own. Even if you share a condition with a blogger, certain details—other complicating health problems, for example—may make his or her treatment different from yours, warns Miller. "The only way to know for sure is to consult a medical professional. Blogs should be a complement to and not a substitute for your doctor."

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Percentage of people who say emotional support from fellow patients, friends, and family members is more helpful than support from doctors and nurses

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project

Illustrations by MATT CHASE

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Percentage of men who search online for information about doctors or other health professionals

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project

CHALLENGE 3

DECODING DOCTOR REVIEWS

You read Yelp religiously for restaurant reviews and trust TripAdvisor to flag roach motels, but can consumer ratings really tell you which doctor to say “aah” for? “Review sites measure the collaborative relationship between doctor and patient. For example, did the physician communicate well and listen to my concerns?” says Jeffrey Segal, M.D., J.D., a neurosurgeon and the author of a new study, published in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, about physician review sites. That means the content of doctor reviews can help you assess such factors as bedside manner and office efficiency but not whether a physician prescribes antibiotics for viral infections or has been sued for malpractice. Do this...

PLAY THE NUMBERS

The overall grade doesn't matter as much as the number of individual grades that contribute to it. Dr. Segal found that the total number of reviews and comments corre-

lated with the volume of procedures a surgeon had performed—an indicator of quality—but the average numerical rating did not. This would most likely work as a gauge of quality for nonsurgical doctors too, Dr. Segal adds. Look up your provider at vitals.com—it's free and includes every doctor in the United States.

LOOK FOR A TRAIL OF BLOOD

The online ratings could claim that he's the sweetest surgeon in the world, but his colleagues might call him Hacksaw Harry in private. Of course, most doctors and nurses won't bad-mouth other professionals, so you will need to do some snooping on your own. Check out docboard.org/docfinder.html, a website that provides access to records of disciplinary actions and, in some states, malpractice suits brought against physicians (and the settlement amounts, if any).

Remember, though, that a malpractice suit doesn't necessarily mean a doctor screwed up. Harvard University researchers recently found that doctors in high-risk specialties—surgeons, gastroenterologists, pulmonologists, and urologists, for example—are almost guaranteed to face at least one malpractice claim over the course of their career. If your potential provider has shelled out some dough, ask about the amount. A study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that when claims were determined to be the result of medical error, doctors paid out an average of about \$522,000, versus \$313,000 for claims that were not ruled as the physician's fault.



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Percentage of news stories that overstate the findings of scientific studies

Source: PLoS Medicine

CHALLENGE 4

DIGESTING HEALTH HEADLINES

With one notable exception—this magazine's website, natch—online news coverage of medical findings can range from spotty to spectacularly bad. The biggest problem? Oversimplification. “Really big studies often have a very narrow focus, so it's difficult to generalize from them,” says Lindsay Thompson, an assistant professor of health policy at the University of Florida. “People who translate studies into news need to understand the nuances.” The simple fix:

RESEARCH THE RESEARCH

Before you run with that too-good-to-be-true news—like “Beet Juice Can Prevent Prostate Cancer!”—dig a little deeper, says Greene. Did the researchers account for factors that may influence results, such as race, age, and economic status? And how big was the study? Two hundred people is considered large for behavioral or psychological studies but very small for drug studies. (The bigger the study, especially if participants came from different regions, the more broadly applicable the findings.) Finally, consider profit motive. Are the researchers affiliated with a group that may have a conflict of interest, like the National Beet Council?

To find this info, look for a more detailed summary of the study on sciencedaily.com or medicalnewstoday.com. Or call your doctor, who can help you interpret the findings. ■



OVER-THE-COUNTER INTELLIGENCE

Order OTC meds online and you could end up with a placebo—or something worse

One main selling point of Internet pharmacies is anonymity—you don't have to face the neighborhood druggist to fill your Cialis scrip. But there's also the convenience factor, which may explain why more than a quarter of men buy their OTC drugs online, according to a recent Mintel survey. Why *not* just buy a bottle of ibuprofen at AllDrugsAlltheTime.com? Two reasons, says Renee Acosta, R.Ph., M.S., an associate professor of pharmacy at the University of Texas. “You face the risk of buying contaminated drugs or drugs that don't even contain the ingredients listed.” In fact, the World Health Organization estimates that half of all meds sold by some online “pharmacies” are fake. Protect yourself by sticking to Web pharmacies accredited by the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy (nabp.net/programs). And if you're buying a drug for the first time—for example, one that recently became available over the counter, such as Allegra Allergy, Zegerid OTC, or Prevacid 24HR—consider shopping at a brick-and-mortar store so the pharmacist can check for interactions with other meds you take. —NICOLE KOETTING

Keith Bedford/Reuters/London