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# Share the Wellness Tip

## When Cyberchondria Attacks

Is your headache from a sinus infection, or a brain tumor? Is your cough caused by allergies, or lung cancer?

If you use an Internet search engine to try to diagnose what's causing your symptom, there's a good chance you'll be guided to information about the more serious but much less common conditions. The longer you spend exploring these bleak scenarios, the more likely your medical concerns will escalate. There's a term for this syndrome: cyberchondria.

Pursuing worst-case information online can be a waste of your time and energy. It also can lead to a lot of unnecessary anxiety and costly doctor visits. Here's a more optimistic — and reliable — approach to harnessing the Internet:

- ✦ First, realize a search engine does not function as a medical expert. Most of its top-ranked results will be websites that get the most traffic, not necessarily sites tailored to your personal needs.
- ✦ Try beginning your search at a website designed specifically for medical self-care decision-making.
- ✦ As you explore further, consult only websites hosted by organizations known for the solid reputation of their health information. Examples include the U.S. government (.gov sites) or respected nonprofits (.org sites) like the American Heart Association.
- ✦ When reading statistics about risk, get a sense of what they mean to you personally. For example, "one in eight women will get breast cancer sometime in her life" doesn't mean every woman, young or old, has a one in eight chance right now of having the disease. The risk increases significantly with age. Or, if you learn that taking a certain medication doubles the risk for stroke, but the risk has doubled to just two in 10,000 people, the benefits may outweigh the risks.

It's great to be informed about your health. Just try to stay optimistic — and know when it makes sense to talk with your doctor. Take advantage of your preventive care visits to ask your doctor any questions you might have. Regular health exams and tests can help find problems before they start.

They also can help find problems early, when your chances for treatment and cure are better. By getting the right health services, screenings, and treatments, you are taking steps that help your chances for living a longer, healthier life.

*Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; The New York Times, November 24, 2008*

