

Paging Dr. Google



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Internet searches can't replace the advice of a real doctor. (Shutterstock)

An Apple or PC a day may keep the doctor away.

There's no appointment necessary, no waiting, and this doctor is always in-ternet. But the problem for some people isn't that they're sick; the problem is that they have a case of Dr. Google.

Sometimes the search engine can be helpful; other times it can be more a of spin doctor than anything else.

A poll by Vision Critical finds more than 50% of Canadians visit the Internet giant's "office" with their medical concerns before they visit their own doctor's office.

Even with a dialup connection – on a Commodore 64 – it can be a lot quicker than waiting to see a physician and then raising your blood pressure in the waiting room an hour past your scheduled visit.

But, be warned:

"I learned long ago that by researching symptoms, illnesses or potential diagnoses online, you will quickly find the worst-case scenario. It's too easy to scare the bejeezus out of yourself," says Dan Augusta, who admits to occasionally probing for information about a diagnosed condition, only to regret it after.

Lane Mercer, MD, notes, "The ability to prioritize symptoms is inherent to a doctor's training and knowledge. Using Google, a person can fit their symptoms to almost any disease thereby deluding themselves for better or worse."

It's not just doctors who see this as an issue. Richard Sigesmund, a pharmacist, says patients constantly think they know better than medical professionals because of web research.

"In the end, you have to know how to evaluate the info you're reading, then be able to read studies/data to ensure that they were properly conducted and to understand the difference between statistical significance and

allegorical 'data.'"

Still, there are times when Google may be just what the doctor should order.

According to a recent British study, one in four women misdiagnose online (that's a 75% accuracy rate), but MDs aren't immune to misdiagnosis.

The American Journal of Medicine has demonstrated doctors' diagnostic errors range from 10% to 15% — and with unreported cases those numbers are likely higher.

In May 2004, the Canadian Medical Association Journal found preventable medical errors contribute somewhere between 9,000 and 24,000 deaths a year in Canada, while a study in the Mayo Clinic Proceedings states the number of missed major diagnoses has not changed over the past 20 to 30 years.

"Google may have saved my life," says Rose Mintz, who lost patience with doctors' misdiagnoses before her online breakthrough.

"One doctor even laughed in my face when I suggested what I thought I had."

A few specialists later, Mintz and Dr. Google Inter-netted themselves a win.

Canadian doctors are well-trained, but they are also over-burdened. A June 2011 National Physician Survey indicated that Canada's health care system requires immediate action in two primary areas: access to timely care and sustainability of the system.

Clicking away doesn't necessarily compensate for a system that may be chipping away.

Dr. John Haggie, president of the Canadian Medical Association, warns it's important to remember that online sources are not always accurate, credible or evidence-based.

"To ensure you get the care you need, Internet advice should never be a substitute for medical advice from your physician."

So help your doctor to service you better. Write down a list of your concerns. If you don't understand anything, ask for clarification and ask if there are any other possible diagnoses.

Also, instead of probing Google so deeply, don't be afraid to probe your doctor in the same way. Don't be embarrassed to explain your problems — physicians are sworn to secrecy; your Google history isn't.

And bring along that smartphone to visit Dr. Google, while waiting in your doctor's office for an hour. Perhaps rather than a replacement, at times its advice can be a supplement. Just remember, it's easy to take a turn for the worse and get a case of Google fever.

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