

Am I a cyberchondriac?

When casually researching your symptoms on the Internet it's easy to get lost in a web of frightening illnesses and diseases.

Margaret Reveley

I have been feeling a bit tired lately, more so than I think may be normal for someone my age. Over the course of a few months it had gotten to the point where it was starting to concern me. I wondered if I was just being lazy or working too much. Perhaps it was just a symptom of aging that I would have to learn to deal with. Then I started to wonder if there was an underlying issue as to why I was feeling this way. So I turned to the first place I go whenever I have a mysterious symptom or medical concern, and it's not my family doctor. It's the Internet.

I could spend hours researching my symptoms on an endless choice of websites that offer advice from what appear to be reputable medical sites. Put a guy in a white coat, add a couple of initials after his name, and why wouldn't I believe what his brief video says about why I've been feeling the way I do? The line is suddenly blurred between "trust me; I'm a doctor" and "trust me; I'm the Internet."

With a few clicks of the mouse it's easy to convince myself that I might have a variety of ailments, but which one? I can rule out chronic fatigue syndrome; I don't fit the criteria of symptoms. Am I diabetic? I could go to my

elderly neighbor's house and ask her to give me a blood glucose test. I try to determine whether I've been thirstier than usual or had to pee more often. Do I have sleep apnea? A close friend has that and has been using a continuous positive airway pressure machine for years. I don't like that choice one bit. The thought of having to strap some kind of iron lung apparatus to my head every night is not where I want to go. Heart disease is a possibility. That is a very scary choice. Anemia, depression, hypothyroidism, caffeine, dehydration, food allergies. Yikes, all that from just one site!

Usually I can talk myself out of my self-diagnosis; after all, I am just a bit more tired than usual. But it may play on my mind for a while and I will go back to these sites again to make sure I haven't missed anything. It's easy to get lost in this web of frightening illnesses and diseases. Each possible diagnosis takes me down another road into a cyber-jungle of scary medical terms and conditions. What if I am anemic? One site says anemia can be caused by anemia of chronic disease and that it can indicate a malignancy. Now there's a word that screams cancer at me. Images come to mind of terrible things growing in dark hidden recesses of my body; terrible things that will surely kill a person in a most unpleasant way. What if I do have sleep apnea and require a uvulopalatopharyngoplasty? That makes a tonsillectomy sound like a tea party.

I can see how easy it is for a person to convince themselves that they have a terrible lurking disease. Am I becoming a hypochondriac? I like to think not, but my curiosity about my fatigue has taken me from having a common symptom to experiencing a kind of medical neurotic excess. Convinced that I am not the only person who acts like this, I did what any other rational adult would do and looked it up on the Internet. I was surprised to find that searching for medical sites is next in line in popularity after searching for porn and online gambling. That says a lot about what is going on in suburbia. I was also surprised to see that a term has already been coined for this behavior: "cyberchondria." Saying that a little knowledge can be a bad thing certainly seems true in this case.

When I brought up this topic in conversation, someone said they knew a couple who divorced and this very problem was one of the contributing factors. Apparently, the husband would come home from work to his stay-at-home wife who had worked herself into such a mouse-clicking hysteria throughout the day that she was constantly convinced she was dying of some terrible malady. It came to the point where she was not just looking up her symptoms, but actually convincing herself that she had symptoms that were mentioned on the sites. Clearly, this web-induced medical anxiety was adversely affecting her life.

Ms Reveley is a fiction writer and is very pleased to have her first nonfiction piece appear in the *BCMJ*.

This article has been peer reviewed.

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The Internet, with its limitless access to information, has already changed our society, but what changes will it bring to how doctors interact with their patients? What are the hidden dangers in untrained people like me even knowing what a uvulopalatopharyngoplasty is? Maybe that wealth of knowledge should be left to those who know how to navigate the mysterious and complex world of medicine. When we start to see doctors' waiting rooms filled with people holding computer printouts in their hands then we may already be down a slippery slope of no return. But that is for the future to reveal. For now, I need to figure out why I've been feeling so tired lately. Tomorrow I will make an appointment with my doctor, and while I'm there I need to remember to ask him if he thinks I'm turning into a cyberchondriac.

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