



AGING TODAY

## Dr. Google

By Bob Roth, Managing Partner of Cypress HomeCare Solutions



### **The information superhighway turbocharged**

with my smart phone has made me a jack of many trades. Chef extraordinaire, plumbing expert, and political pundit were among the many hats I have worn this past month, much to my family's delight and dismay. Thinking back to my college experience, I could never have imagined the abundance of information at my fingertips in seconds without having stepped foot into a library.

In this reality of instant information, the world is your oyster! However, if your oyster consumption precedes a hepatitis diagnosis, there is an important caveat which begs you to slow down and proceed with caution when asking "Dr. Google."

Let's be real, who hasn't googled symptoms? It comes in pretty handy when Auntie Ida Know tells you to put butter on that kitchen burn. Tens of millions of Internet inquiries a day are symptom-related. If you have consulted Dr. Google, you know that health content on the web can be hard to decipher.

Vague symptoms such as headache and fatigue can easily lead to conclusion leaps of unlikely conditions causing agitation and stress. A new term, cyberchondria, is used to describe those who suffer from this self-inflicted anxiety. Even Google makes a point to warn its search engine users that medical-related data on the web is "intended for informational purposes only and you should always consult a doctor."

Then there are those who search the Internet after receiving sobering news. If you are facing a serious medical diagnosis and are feeling under informed and overwhelmed, you are not alone. But, please know that heading full throttle into the Internet abyss fueled by panic and fear can certainly do more harm than good.

First, get the exact medical terminology of the diagnosis you are facing. Don't feel intimidated to ask the physician to spell it out for you and read it back to the physician to confirm accuracy. Inform the physician that you will be researching this condition on your own and ask for their recommendation on where to begin.

In your search, include as many descriptive words as you can that relate to your specific condition. For example, instead of searching "breast cancer," search "triple negative breast cancer." It is even better to add on other descriptive terms that are unique to you, such as post-menopausal, no family history, age, and healthy. Every time you add more descriptors it will narrow down the number of links associated with your query which can be more relative to your diagnosis.

The frustration associated with Internet searches is that you will find both up to the minute and out dated archived content. Be mindful of that and look for dates of the findings, if possible.

It is imperative to view information through a somewhat skeptical lens. As much as we want to believe what we read, the Internet in general and medical information posted is not a commercial free zone. Advertisements pop up even before you click a link.

As I was researching for this piece, I put "CLL" in a search window to see what would come up for chronic lymphocytic leukemia. The very first link was information that was supplied by a pharmaceutical manufacturer. It was a paid advertisement. I know that because it had Ad surround by a rectangle beside the link. This information is not necessarily biased. There are rigorous standards for drugs to get to market and must be approved for specific indications. As a consumer, you should know who is supplying this information.

Remember anyone can post to the Internet and scams are everywhere, and unfortunately prey upon those most vulnerable. Our older adult population who are new adopters to searching online may have difficulty deciphering credible sites. Just because a medically oriented website looks impressive does not mean it is backed by health care professionals. Scammers know that many who search for health-related information are scared and sometimes desperate.

I highly recommend the book, "The Web-Savvy Patient: An Insider's Guide to Navigating the Internet When Facing Medical Crisis" by Andrew Schorr. It is a comprehensive guide to becoming an empowered advocate for your own health and the health of your loved ones.

When I ponder the technological advances that have happened in my lifetime, I am blown away by the bipolarity of my own feelings. The connectivity that my children have grown up with are blessings and curses of biblical proportions. In this world we have scholarly articles and medical scams on the same web page. It is a world where we are never bored and seldom creative. Knowledge is power. Dr. Google's orders: Use the Internet with the guidance of your physician and not in place of sound medical advice.

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