

Mayo Clinic Medical Edge

Cyberchondria

Intro: Just about everyone searches the Internet now and then for health information. But for some, that searching becomes an obsession. They spend hours worrying and looking at causes for symptoms until they're convinced they have a deadly disease. It's called cyberchondria. Doctors at Mayo Clinic see people who struggle with it and they have advice on how to manage it.

Video

Audio

TRT 2:35 Jennifer Koski	"I'm checking all the time."
Voice of Vivien Williams	When Jennifer Koski gets a symptom, maybe a headache or a rash, she hits the internet to learn more.
Jennifer Koski Internet user	"There are hundreds of pictures of rashes on the internet, right? Part of the time you say, well thank goodness, mine doesn't look like that, right? (laughter)"
Voice of Vivien Williams	But for people with health anxiety, which Jennifer does not have, the glut of health and medical information on the internet can fuel worries.
Jennifer Koski Internet user	"Sometimes you assume things are worse than they are. Instead of it being a little dermatitis, now you're thinking, I have skin cancer."
Voice of Vivien Williams	It's called cyberchondria. Searching the internet because of illness anxiety, but that searching makes the anxiety worse.
Richard Seime, Ph.D., L.P. Mayo Clinic psychologist	"I have worked with individuals who spend 5 to 6 hours every day."
Jen Koski Internet user	"The worst thing you can feed into is looking at a symptoms list."
Jennifer Koski Internet user	"You start talking yourself into these other symptoms, I think, or you start worrying that you have them."
Voice of Vivien Williams	Instead of being reassured by the information...
Jennifer Koski Internet user	"I'm searching for information on a raised mole I have on my neck."

Voice of Vivien Williams	It heightens your anxiety until you're convinced something is very, very wrong. Blogs with comments from people who are not health experts, while sometimes helpful, can also become problematic for people with cyberchondria.
Jennifer Koski Internet user	"If I didn't know any better I'd start panicking a little bit about some of the scary things they're saying could be happening or what I should be doing."
Vivien Williams Mayo Clinic News Network	Jennifer's able to keep all this in perspective, but the question is, when does it become a problem for which you need to shut the computer and get some help?
Richard Seime, Ph.D., L.P. Mayo Clinic Psychologist	"It needs to be treated. When it gets to the extent that its governing people's lives, causing interference with their day to day function, their roles in the family..."
Voice of Vivien Williams	Mayo Clinic psychologist Dr. Richard Seime says that's when its time to talk to a health care professional. He says Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, or CBT, can help break the cycle of searching and calm fears. It involves helping people weight the evidence – that a symptom such as a stomachache is more likely to be a benign condition than a deadly one. It also helps people learn to live with their uncertainty and reassure themselves when they experience distressing sensations or symptoms. And it helps get people off the internet and back into life.
Jennifer Koski Internet user	"I'm usually good at stopping myself and saying, ok, common sense."
Voice of Vivien Williams	But if you can't stop yourself, take Dr. Seime's advice and reach out to healthcare professionals who can help.
	For the Mayo Clinic News Network, I'm Vivien Williams.

Anchor tag:

The Internet is rich with health and medical information. Dr. Seime says it's important to go to reputable sites. Look for sites that end in .gov or are from credentialed health care institutions such as Mayo Clinic.

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