CYBERCHONDRIA: Too Much Information for the Health Anxious Consumer?

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CYBERCHONDRIA

• Not an official diagnosis in the DSM

• Recently included in the Oxford English Dictionary:
  “a person who (obsessively) researches health information on the Internet, typically to find a disease matching particular (real or imagined) symptoms.”

• Finalist for “2008 Word of the Year” by Webster's New World
CYBERCHONDRIA

• First mention of “cyberchondria” was in a 1996 news wire article

• “Cyberchondriacs Get What Goes Around on the Internet Now” (Wall Street Journal, 1999)

• Popularized, particularly UK in early 2000s
  • The “deluded belief you suffer from all the diseases featured on the internet” (Sunday Times, 2000)
  • “The excessive use of internet health sites to fuel health anxiety” (The Independent, 2001)
MEDICAL LEXICON

• “Healthcare on the Internet: Buyers Beware” warned the Medical Journal of Australia (Yellowlees, 2000)

• Since that time, a growing number of scholarly articles have explored the topic in greater depth (Stone and Sharpe, 2003; Lewis, 2006; Smith et al., 2006; White and Horvitz, 2009; Wickham, 2009; Baumgartner and Hartmann, 2011; Aiken and Kirwan, 2012; Starcevic and Berle, 2013)
PATHOLOGICAL?

• Popular and scholarly sources tend to use the word “cyberchondria” in negative terms

• Online health information seeking as a pathological/disordered behavior

• Possibility of online reinforcement of disordered behaviors (Rice, 2006), but all individuals who seek online health information don’t have a mental disorder
HEALTH ANXIETY & INFORMATION SEEKING

• Research links excessive searching for health information with health anxiety (White and Horvitz, 2009; Baumgartner and Hartmann, 2011; Starcevic and Berle, 2013)

• Some researchers have begun using the term health anxiety in place of hypochondria (Taylor and Asmundson, 2004)

• Others claim not a clinical diagnosis but a phenomenon present in a number of medical diagnoses or psychiatric conditions listed in the DSM (Abramowitz and Braddock, 2011)
HEALTH ANXIETY & INFORMATION SEEKING

• Reassurance-seeking behaviors are common:
  • repeatedly checking the Internet or medical texts for health symptoms
  • presenting to several different doctors for multiple second opinions (Taylor and Asmundson, 2004)

• Can be heightened by the negative information an individual encounters online (Abramowitz and Braddock, 2011)
REASSURANCE-SEEKING

• May be difficult to stop because it can seem to “work” by producing a temporary reduction in anxiety

• The result is that a reassurance-seeking behavior, like searching for information online or visiting health care providers for second opinions, can become a habitual response to anxiety (Taylor and Asmundson, 2004)
PROBLEMS WITH ONLINE REASSURANCE-SEEKING

• Study participants erroneously used search engines as a diagnostic tool

• Believed the higher the search result ranking the higher the likelihood of the disease

• Greater proportion focuses on the rare (brain tumor) rather than the more common (headache) >> escalation of health anxiety if overestimate the likelihood (White and Horvitz, 2009)
ONLINE SYMPTOM CHECKERS

FamilyDoctor.org -- Search by Symptom

HealthyChildren.org -- Symptom Checker
<http://www.healthychildren.org/english/tips-tools/symptom-checker>

Isabel Symptom Checker
<http://symptomchecker.isabelhealthcare.com/home/default>

iTriage Symptom Checker
<https://www.itriagehealth.com/>

Mayo Clinic Symptom Checker
<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/symptom-checker/DS00671>

WebMD Symptom Checker
<http://symptoms.webmd.com/>
ONLINE SYMPTOM CHECKERS

“Now more health-care providers are turning the tables, steering patients to new and improved computerized symptom-checkers that make it easier for them to get reliable information about possible diagnoses, research their condition and even connect directly to a doctor.

Doctors are adding these tools to their websites and incorporating them into electronic medical records, encouraging patients to use them before office visits to save time and make consultations more productive.” (Wall Street Journal, 2013)
DISCUSSION

• Very little analysis as to whether or not online symptom checkers are accurate
  • Boots WebMD (UK version) correctly diagnosed 70% of the patients in their study (Farmer, Bernardotto, and Singh, 2011)

• Further research needed:
  • Determine accuracy of symptom checkers
  • Pathways between reassurance-seeking through online symptom checkers, health anxiety, and cyberchondria
REFERENCES


