

Cyberchondria - A Type of Hypochondriasis

Dr. Suresh Patil

Associate Professor, Government College of Nursing, BIMS, Belagavi, India

Abstract: *Cyberchondria is the overuse of the internet to diagnose one's own health issues, which causes worry to rise. People who are prone to health anxiety are kept in the cycle of anxiety by researching symptoms online. One such negative effect is cyberchondria, which is the increase in anxiety associated by frequent Internet searches for medical information. A person must resist the impulse to go online and control their media use if they want to reduce cyberchondria and other health anxiety - related habits.*

Keywords: Cyberchondria, Self diagnosis, anxiety, hypochondriasis, online search

1. Introduction

The Internet has developed into one of man's most important tools for information, employment possibilities, education, entertainment, social media, and networking, and it is progressively becoming an integral part of our daily lives. With the introduction of modern smart phones, tablets, and PCs, the general public now has easy access to the Internet or has it "at their fingertips."

The Internet has evolved into a limitless place for information sharing, social networking, and the growth of cyber behaviours. It is no longer just an infrastructure. A wide range of electronic and optical networking technologies connect the various private, public, academic, business, and government networks, which range in size from local to worldwide. Because of the internet, the world has become smaller and more resembles a little hamlet.

Information on a variety of subjects, including health, is increasingly being found online. Internet searches for health information are conducted by more than half of Europeans. Nearly 70% of Internet users now turn to the Internet as their primary resource when they have a health - related inquiry. Health - related queries can be quickly answered, discreetly, and affordably, wherever there is a need.

People who are concerned about their health frequently look online for information regarding their symptoms, however it is unclear how much online research and clinical factors are associated to health anxiety. Those who experience health anxiety may experience special affective pressure from the internet as a source of knowledge. A benign symptom enquiry into a search engine is likely to produce a disproportionately high incidence of statistically implausible answers, such as a life - threatening sickness, because information from the web is frequently of unregulated veracity. Users are generally reluctant to question the accuracy of the information they get or pay attention to the base rates of illnesses.

People who worry about being sick are less inclined to check the reliability of the source and are more afraid of what they see. Additionally, it has been discovered that moderate levels of anxiety and higher checking in non - clinical samples are linked to an increase in the frequency of doctor's appointments, an increase in the risk that people will be

"frightened" by health - related web material, and a worsening of health anxiety.



Meaning of cyberchondria:

Cyberchondria is a phrase used to describe obsessively browsing the internet for medical information. In more recent times, it has been described as a pattern of excessive and recurrent online symptom - checking behavior that is allegedly linked to underlying health concerns and unassurable.

Traditionally, the doctor has been the primary source of information regarding a patient's diagnosis and course of treatment. When patients use the internet to educate themselves and want to take a more active role in their own care, this standard is altered. Research studies have attempted to redefine the characteristics of cyberchondria, concentrating on the online health information - researching behavior rather than the hypochondriacal element.

The term hypochondria is defined as "excessive concern about health" by Harris Interactive, a market research firm with headquarters in the United States that has conducted numerous studies on cyberchondria. This definition clarifies that the term "cyberchondria" does not have the same negative meaning as the word "hypochondria," which is defined as "online concern about health".

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM - 5) does not list cyberchondria as a recognized diagnosis. The phrase is a play on hypochondria, which is another name for the DSM - 5 condition known as "illness anxiety disorder."

Incidence:

- According to a 2015 assessment of the literature, 90% of Americans have used the internet to look for health - related material, and a 2013 study found that 1 in 3 adults have used it to try to diagnose a medical ailment.
- According to a survey done among the Indian population, cyberchondria affected 55.6% of people. The predominant patterns were compulsive behaviors, extensive online seeking, the need for confirmation followed by distress from health worry.
- Specific diseases and health issues (66%), medical treatments and procedures (55%), exercise and dieting (52%), health workers (47%), and medicine (45%) are the health topics that users most frequently search for.

Risk Factors for the Development of Cyberchondria:

- **Health anxiety:** One of the more significant risk factors for the beginning of cyberchondria has been identified as health worry. It has been established that persons with high health anxiety actually search about health more frequently—the majority at least once a week—and for longer periods of time, which supports the idea that this practise is excessive. In terms of the effects of searching, research has shown that those with high levels of health anxiety express increased worry and anxiety after searching and visit their doctor more frequently as a result of the knowledge they have gained online.
- **Intolerance of uncertainty:** Reducing uncertainty is one of the key objectives of health - related Internet searches. A person does not have to bear uncertainty for a long period of time, unlike in the event of a visit to the doctor, because the Internet makes it possible to investigate a minor symptom as soon as it manifests, which is a huge benefit for users. Searching, however, could also lead to more doubt because consumers are exposed to a lot of material online that might be conflicting.
- **Anxiety sensitivity:** The main feature of the idea of anxiety sensitivity is the propensity for catastrophic interpretations of anxiety symptoms because of the conviction that they will have negative bodily, psychological, and social effects. The person may be worried about the physical effects (such as a cardiac attack), the psychological effects (such as losing their sanity), or the social effects (such as embarrassment).

2. Signs and Symptoms

Following are the some of the symptoms of cyberchondria:

- Devoting at least one to three hours to online symptom research.
- Online searches tend to leave people feeling disturbed and nervous rather than confident or in control.
- The need for people to look for health information is obsessive and difficult to resist.
- The individual fears contracting multiple illnesses rather than simply one or two.
- He or she feels the need to look for affirmation from a physician or other medical expert.
- Individuals mistrust medical professionals' diagnoses.
- Rechecking symptoms online compulsively even after conducting thorough searches previously. On some days, you might check your symptoms up to five times.

Cyberchondria and mental health:

- Like illness anxiety disorder and general anxiety, cyberchondria can have an effect on a person's quality of life, particularly if it is severe.
- Daily tasks can become more challenging when you're experiencing terrible anxiety.
- Stress levels can be increased by anxiety. Physical signs of stress and anxiety might include headaches and high blood pressure.
- Additionally, anxiety can harm friendships and family ties or harm one's career if they end up missing too many days of work for medical appointments. If you request several medical tests, it could even be costly.

Prevention and management of Cyberchondria:

- Determine whether a patient needs urgent medical care. Yes, there are medical emergencies. Do the necessary thing right away rather than browsing the internet.
- Resist the impulse to browse the web. Try to resist the desire to examine symptoms online if they do not require immediate medical attention. Delaying cravings to check can help you become more resilient and tolerant of uncertainty, even if you can't stop.
- Accepting strange physical experiences. Accepting that having odd or uncomfortable body sensations is common is crucial. Those who do not experience health anxiety frequently are not aware of these symptoms, or if they are, they do not take them seriously.
- Those who suffer from health anxiety are too concerned about their bodies. shifting focus to an exterior object. Consider how the outside leaves on the trees move in the wind, the painting hanging on the wall, the colours, etc.
- Controlling media usage. Limit your exposure if the illness you're afraid of is regularly highlighted in the media. It won't get better if you watch television or films about feared diseases or read articles about them.
- Making an effort to fight the impulse to engage in excessive activities of comfort seeking. Seeing a physician. Speaking with a doctor regarding health anxiety may be beneficial. discussing the fight with health concerns with them and seeking their opinion on what constitutes an urgent medical condition.

3. Conclusion

Information seeking is now easier and faster than ever because to the Internet's widespread accessibility. More people are turning to the Internet to find information, particularly health - related information. The benefits of the Internet are undeniable, but it is also becoming more and more clear that there are drawbacks to this method of information gathering. Cyberchondria, or the escalation of anxiety accompanied by recurrent Internet searches for health information, is one such unfavorable effect. It is suggested that this is the same phenomenon since those with a high level of health worry are more likely to exhibit cyberchondria. However, methodologically sound longitudinal investigations have demonstrated that even in healthy individuals, searching may eventually cause the emergence of excessive anxiety about health. These results lend support to the cognitive - behavioral paradigm, which postulates that seeking may both cause and maintain health

anxiety.

References

- [1] Taylor H. Explosive growth of a new breed of “cyberchondriacs” In: L. H. Associates, editor. *The Harris Poll*.1999; 11.
- [2] Starcevic V, Berle D. Cyberchondria: Towards a better understanding of excessive health - related Internet use. *Expert Rev Neurother*.2013; 13: 205–213.
- [3] Starcevic V, Aboujaoude E. Cyberchondria, cyberbullying, cybersuicide, cybersex: “new” psychopathologies for the 21st century? *World Psychiatry*.2015; 4: 97–100.
- [4] Bajcar B, Babiak J. Self - esteem and cyberchondria: The mediation effects of health anxiety and obsessive–compulsive symptoms in a community sample. *Curr Psychol*.2021; 40: 2820–2831.
- [5] Doherty - Torstrick ER, Walton KE, Fallon BA. Cyberchondria: Parsing Health Anxiety From Online Behavior. *Psychosomatics*.2016 Jul - Aug; 57 (4): 390 - 400.
- [6] Makarla S, Gopichandran V, Tondare D. Prevalence and correlates of cyberchondria among professionals working in the information technology sector in Chennai, India: A cross - sectional study. *J Postgrad Med*.2019 Apr - Jun; 65 (2): 87 - 92.
- [7] Hallyburton A, Evarts LA. Gender and online health information seeking: A five survey meta - analysis. *J Consum Health Internet* 2014; 18 (2): 128 - 42.
- [8] Nikoloudakis IA, Vandelanotte C, Rebar AL, Schoeppe S, Alley S, Duncan MJ et al. Examining the Correlates of Online Health Information–Seeking Behavior Among Men Compared With Women. *Am J Men’s Health* 2018; 12 (5): 1358 - 67.
- [9] Lee YJ, Boden - Albala B, Larson E, Wilcox A, Bakken S. Online health information seeking behaviors of Hispanics in New York City: a community - based cross - sectional study. *J Med Internet Res* 2014; 16 (7): e176
- [10] <https://www.psychologytoday.com>