

'Cyberchondria' from online health searches is worse for those who fear the unknown

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Turning to the Internet to find out what ails you is common, but for folks who have trouble handling uncertainty, "cyberchondria" – the online counterpart to hypochondria – worsens as they seek answers, a Baylor University researcher says.

"If I'm someone who doesn't like [uncertainty](#), I may become more anxious, search further, monitor my body more, go to the doctor more frequently—and the more you search, the more you consider the possibilities," said Thomas Fergus, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychology and [neuroscience](#) in Baylor's College of Arts & Sciences. "If I see a site about traumatic brain injuries and have difficulties tolerating uncertainty, I might be more likely to worry that's the cause of the bump on my head."

His study is published in the journal *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*.

As if fearing a catastrophic disease or injury isn't bad enough, doubts about health—unfounded or not—can trigger worries about potential medical bills, disability and job loss, he said. And that can lead to even more Googling, obsessing, doctor visits, unnecessary medical testing and distress.

Prior research shows that approximately eight of 10 American adults seek medical information on the Internet.

Fergus sampled 512 healthy adults, with a mean age of 33.4 years. Fifty-five percent were women, 59 percent had at least a two-year degree, 53 percent worked at least 20 hours weekly, and 67 percent were unmarried.

He used several measures, among them a scale in which people assessed such statements as "I always want to know what the future has in store for me"; a health anxiety inventory, in which—regardless of their actual health—they responded to such statements as "I spend most of my time worrying about my health"; and a scale assessing how searches for online [health information](#) affected respondents' anxiety.

While fearing the worst when it comes to health is not new, the online glut of medical information – some of it from questionable sources – may be more disturbing than that contained in medical manuals that people consult or obtain directly from a doctor, Fergus said.

"When you look at a medical book, you might not see all the possibilities at once, but online you're presented with so many," he said.

Provided by Baylor University

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