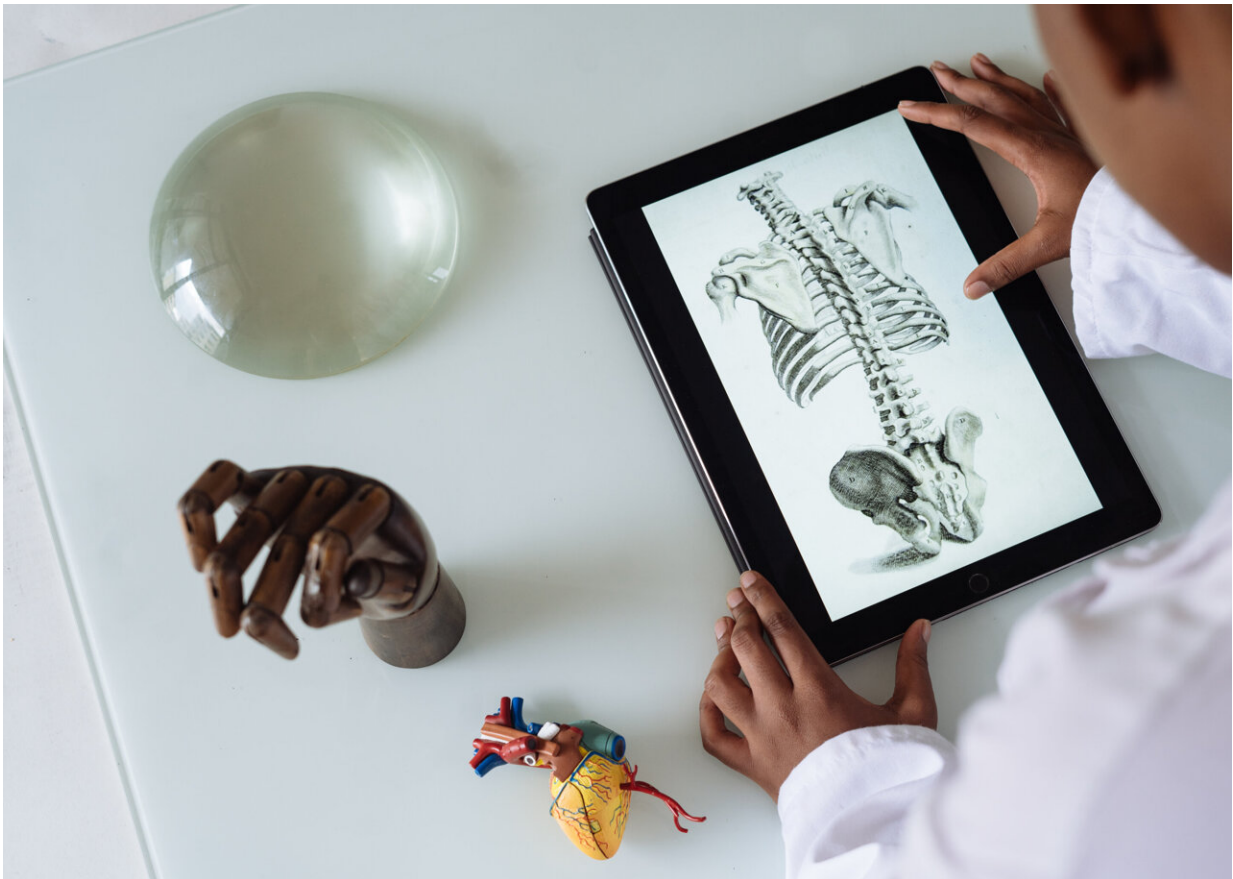# How to talk to your doctor about information you find online

December 6 2017, by Elizabeth Sillence And Lauren Georgia Bussey

Credit: RF._.studio from Pexels

More and more people are [going online to search for information](#) about their health. Though it can be a minefield, where unverified sources

abound, searching the internet can help people to understand different health problems, and give them access to emotional and social support.

For many in the UK, getting to actually see a GP remains difficult, and constraints around appointment times mean that some discussions are often cut short. But by using the internet, patients can prepare for appointments, or follow up on issues that were raised in the consulting room but left them with unanswered questions.

But not everyone is so keen on patients using the internet in this way. Some GPs and other heath professionals have doubts about the quality and usefulness of the information available. There are also suggestions that "cyberchrondria" may be fuelling a surge in unnecessary tests and appointments.

Similarly, though so many people are using online resources to fill in gaps in their knowledge, or to help them ask the right questions, they may not be comfortable bringing it up in the consulting room.

For our latest research project, we wanted to find out just why it can be so difficult to discuss online information with doctors. We found that in addition to people being embarrassed in case they have misunderstood the information, or can't remember it accurately, they also fear a negative reaction from the GP who may think they are difficult or challenging.

How to make it work

So how can you as a patient bring up online information with your doctor? First, it sounds obvious but you need a good, open relationship with your GP. Tell them you have been looking online, but ask for their feedback on the information, and for any useful sites they know of. We found that patients with a good doctor relationship felt able to discuss

information and ideas from websites and online forums in a considered and critical manner.

Importantly, it is not about the patient trying to be the doctor. Ideally, patients should bring along their information, use it to help explain their key concerns, or detail the options they've explored, but also make clear that they still want and value their GP's input on their findings.

Some of the patients we spoke to told us that they are acutely aware of their doctor's negative feelings towards the internet. In these situations, people are sometimes tempted to disguise the source of their information. Rather than openly discussing their findings from the internet, they may pretend they got the information elsewhere when mentioning it to their doctor or be very careful not to reveal its origin at all.

For some people we spoke to, the process of trying to integrate the results of their web searches into their communications with the GP was frustrating to say the least. They felt uncomfortable, embarrassed, and sometimes held back key information. This made for unproductive meetings which were felt to be a waste of time.

This process can definitely be improved. As more appointments are going to be conducted over smartphone rather than face to face, and some GPs have admitted using Wikipedia to diagnose patients, the rest of the process needs to catch up with technology.

There needs to be a new and more productive way to integrate online information into doctor-patient discussions. First of all, there should be better ways for patients to collect and organise accurate information online so that they can organise their thoughts and prepare for a visit.

In the consulting room itself, GPs should use the research as an

opportunity to have more productive discussions, and use it as a way to teach patients more about their own [health](#) issues. They need to question the information source, message and credibility, but GPs could also use it as an opportunity to nudge [patients](#) to think about their health options and consider what's important to them.

Just as a GP is not solely responsible for the health of a patient, neither is the patient themselves. Internet research can no longer be dismissed. Even if inaccurate, it can help build a better relationship between patient and doctor, and give them both a better understanding of managing health in the modern world.

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