

# If Dr. Google's making you sick with worry, there's help

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Credit: Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels

It's a busy day at the office and your left eye has been twitching uncontrollably. So, out of curiosity and irritation you Google it.

Various benign causes—stress, exhaustion, too much caffeine—put your mind at ease initially. But you don't stop there. Soon, you find out eye twitches could be a symptom of something more sinister, causing you to panic.

You ruin the rest of the day trawling through [web pages](#) and forums, reading frightening stories convincing you you're seriously ill.

For many of us, this cycle has become common. It can cause [anxiety](#), unnecessary contact with [health services](#), and at the extreme, impact our day-to-day functioning.

But our [recently published research](#), the first to evaluate online therapy for this type of excessive and distressing health-related Googling, shows what can help.

## **I've heard of 'cyberchondria.' Do I have it?**

The term "cyberchondria" describes the anxiety we experience as a result of excessive web searches about symptoms or diseases.

It's not an official diagnosis, but is an obvious play on the word "hypochondria," now known as health anxiety. It's obsessional worrying about health, online.

[Some argue](#) cyberchondria is simply a modern form of health anxiety. But [studies show](#) even people who don't normally worry about their health can see their concerns spiral after conducting an initial web search.

Cyberchondria [is when searching is](#):

- **excessive:** searching for too long, or too often

- **difficult to control:** you have difficulty controlling, stopping or preventing searching
- **distressing:** it causes a lot of distress, anxiety or fear
- **impairing:** it has an impact on your day-to-day life.

If this sounds like you, there's help.

## We tested an online therapy and here's what we found

We tested whether [an online treatment program](#) helped reduce cyberchondria in 41 people with severe health anxiety. We compared how well it worked compared with a [control group](#) of 41 people who learned about general (not health-related) anxiety and stress management online.

The online treatment is based on cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), which involves learning more helpful ways of thinking and behaving.

Participants completed six online CBT modules over 12 weeks, and had phone support from a psychologist.

The [treatment](#) explained how excessive web searching can become a problem, how to search about health effectively, and practical tools to prevent and stop it (see a summary of those tips below).

We found the online treatment was more effective at reducing cyberchondria than the control group. It helped reduce the frequency of online searches, how upsetting the searching was, and improved participants' ability to control their searching. Importantly, these behavioral changes were linked to improvements in health anxiety.

Although we don't know whether the program simply reduced or completely eliminated cyberchondria, these findings show if you're

feeling anxious about your health, you can use our practical strategies to reduce anxiety-provoking and excessive online searching about [health](#).

## So, what can I do?

Here are our top tips from the treatment program:

- **be aware of your searching:** don't just search on auto-pilot. Take note of when, where, how often, and what you are searching about. Keep track of this for several days so you can spot the warning signs and high-risk times for when you're more likely to get stuck in excessive searching. Then you can make a plan to do other things at those times
- **understand how web searches work:** web search algorithms are mysterious beasts. But top search results are not necessarily the most likely explanation for your symptoms. Top search results are often click-bait—the rare, but fascinating and horrific stories about illness we can't help clicking on (not the boring stuff)
- **be smart about how you search:** limit yourself to websites with reliable, high quality, balanced information such as government-run websites and/or those written by medical professionals. Stay away from blogs, forums, testimonials or social media
- **challenge your thoughts by thinking of alternative explanations for your symptoms:** for example, even though you think your eye twitch might be motor neuron disease, what about a much more likely explanation, such as staring at the computer screen too much
- **use other strategies to cut down, and prevent you from searching:** focus on scheduling these activities at your high-risk times. These can be absorbing activities that take your focus and can distract you; or you can use relaxation strategies to calm your mind and body
- **surf the urge:** rather than searching straight away when you feel

the urge to search about your symptoms, put it off for a bit, and see how the urge to [search](#) reduces over time.

And if those don't help, consult a doctor or psychologist.

If this article has raised issues for you, or if you're concerned about someone you know, check out resources about anxiety from [Beyond Blue](#), the Centre for Clinical Interventions [Helping Health Anxiety](#) workbook or [THIS WAY UP](#) online courses.

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