



Office Visit: Paging Dr. Google

Journal Record

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In the age of the Internet, information is accessible at the click of a button. From blogs to message boards, consumers can consult others prior to purchasing products or services of any kind. This is more prominent than ever in the health care industry. Over the past several years, I've seen a drastic increase in the frequency of patients who show up to an appointment armed with information from the Internet. So, when I saw a recent study published in the July issue of *The Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery* about the quality of medical information available online, I was very interested in the results.

While this study focused specifically on sports medicine, it's a great example of why patients who use the Internet to help make medical decisions need to know that the Web may not be providing the whole picture. Nearly three-quarters of the U.S. population has access to the Internet, and more than half of those people go online for health-related information at least once a month. However, quality control over health information found online has not grown at the same rate that Internet use has.

Authors of this study chose to review online information associated with 10 of the most common sports-related injuries. Using Google and Yahoo, the study reviewed the search results, looking for completeness, accuracy and clarity of the information. They also recorded the source of the information – whether the site's owner was a nonprofit organization, news source, academic institution, individual, physician or commercial enterprise.

The results of the study were not surprising. In terms of content, nonprofit sites scored the highest, followed by academic sites and then commercial sites such as WebMD and eMedicine. The least accurate information sources were newspaper articles and personal websites. Commercial sites with a financial interest in the diagnosis, such as those sponsored by companies selling a drug or treatment device, were very common but frequently incomplete.

Because sponsored sites are motivated to promote their products, they often provide patients with biased information that rarely mentions risks or complications associated with their products or treatment. So, when researching any product or service on the Internet, it's buyer beware. However, despite its shortcomings, the Internet is the present and future of how patients obtain information to make their health care decisions.

To ensure patients are finding the most credible information online, they should make sure to look at multiple sources, avoid commercial websites – except for the most reputable sites such as Web MD and eMedicine – and, of course, always discuss researched information with a physician.

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