



E-health: is it bad for you?

We're all guilty of consulting Dr Google for answers to our health niggles – but could the information we find on the Internet actually be bad for us? **DR NICOLA DAVIES** looks at the rise in popularity of e-health in Ireland.

It's 5am in the morning and your eight-month-old is screaming. Twenty years ago, you might have made a call to your local paediatric or emergency service. Today, you're more likely to log on to the internet and look up the symptoms yourself.

We are entering an era of 'e-health,' where as many as 80 per cent of internet users seek health information online. Not only are we expected to find our own health information, but many of us want to. Never has this been truer than for parents, with research suggesting that parents are increasingly turning to the internet for information on their children's health.

Ireland is one of the leading countries in e-health, with Dublin hosting a major e-health summit in May 2013. The popularity of e-health in Ireland is evident

by the staggering 154,069 registered members of Irishhealth.com. Millions of people access websites every month to find health information and a significant percentage of those people are able to avoid a visit to the GP by doing so. The abundance of health information available

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online is, in the main, a good thing – but it's not without some problems. We look at how you can avoid these problems and harness the power of e-health.

Don't Google your symptoms

“Do not just go to Google or Wikipedia,” cautions American paediatrician Dr Exe Wexler. “Anyone can create a 'health' or 'parenting' website, but the advice given may not be from a real expert.” Instead, she recommends that parents talk to doctors ahead of time and get a list of trusted sites that can provide reliable information when needed.

If you can't resist typing your child's symptoms, or your own, into your favourite search engine, then at least evaluate the results carefully. Dr Wexler says that it's important to check that information is backed up by cited sources, such as books or medical journals with recent publication dates. “Anything without a source is probably made up,” she warns.

Identify trusted sites

You can find sites that are full of reliable

information, but how can you identify those sites from the less reliable sources? UK websites should display the Information Standard quality mark, which was established by the Department of Health to help people make informed choices regarding healthcare and treatment. In Ireland, the sign of a trusted website is one supported by the Health Service Executive, such as Healthlink (www.healthlink.ie), or one that adheres to the principles of the Health on the Net Foundation, such as Irishhealth.com.

The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) are taking action to ensure access to safe and reliable health information, including online information. HIQA recommends that you ask the following questions when considering medical advice or health information presented online:

- ♥ Has a clinical expert, whose credentials I can verify independently, approved this information?
- ♥ Is this information reviewed and updated regularly?
- ♥ Is this unbiased information, supported by appropriate research and data?
- ♥ Is this site trying to sell me a specific product?
- ♥ Does this site claim that advice given here can replace my doctor?
- ♥ Is this site asking me to pay for a diagnosis made online and sent by email?

Avoid commercial sites

As a general rule, you should always exercise extreme caution when considering health information from commercial sites. If the goal of a site is to sell you a particular product, then it's highly likely that the information provided is biased. Even if the site itself is not overtly selling, the content may be sponsored by a particular special-interest group.

It's also important to cross-check the information you find online by looking at more than one source. If you're unable to confirm information, this is a warning sign that something may not be right.

Don't try to replace your doctor

The most dangerous thing you can do with online health information, whether it be for yourself or your child, is to start or stop a medication based on what you read on a website. "Always check with your own doctor before starting or stopping any medical treatment," says Dr Wexler. You or your child may already

take a medication that's contradicted with advice you read online. If you're not comfortable enough asking your doctor questions, then it may be time to seek out a new practitioner.

Online privacy and security

When looking for health information online, be wary of entering personal information on web sites. If a web site asks for personal health information, consider why they need it, especially if you're only looking for general information about a condition.

If you have concerns about a particular site, show it to your doctor before you

divulge information. Your personal information could be used to engage in identity theft, or you could be charged for phony medical services.

In addition, if you participate in online health forums, such as Eumom (www.eumom.ie), where parents come together to discuss various health concerns, be careful to shield any personally identifying information. You don't know who is reading your posts, so don't give away information that could be used against you or your family.

You can find plenty of useful, accurate health information online. Just be sure to brush up on your internet safety first! ♥

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E-health: My experience

Abbi Perets, 37, is the mother of Lior (13), Shir (11), Adi (nine), Yoni (seven) and Amit (three).

When my son Adi was two years old, he was diagnosed with a rare genetic syndrome, Sotos, which is characterised by excessive physical growth during the first two to three years of life. From the beginning, my paediatrician cautioned me not to believe everything I read online, but she also advised me that I would find a lot of support from parents of other children with Sotos.

I quickly learned that other parents are a terrific resource, but that it's critical to remember that they are often speaking from a place of emotion and that what they say does not always apply to my son. Sotos syndrome presents with a range of severity. Some children are severely mentally disabled, non-verbal, with multiple health issues; and others (like my son) are borderline 'normal' intelligence with no general health problems.

Like many children with Sotos, my son also has ADHD. Anecdotal evidence about diet and lifestyles changes and using medication is useful, but I don't make health decisions based on what worked for another child. I read copious amounts of information and exchange emails and messages with other parents, but I also consult with my son's doctor before taking action. When we finally made the decision to try ADHD medication, it was after I read nearly every published study on the effects of various drugs on children, and after we met with several specialists in person. I think of online health information as a supplement to my doctor, not a replacement.

