



## Cyberchondria : A health-conscious practise that harms mental health

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### Cyberchondria?

Most individuals use the internet to find some sort of health information, and over the past ten years, a wealth of health information has become readily available online.

Cyberchondria is characterised by constant worries about one's health and obsession with getting a disease. Diagnostic testing and skilled medical examinations do not sufficiently guarantee healthy health. An underlying mental health condition, such as generalised anxiety disorder or depression, is not unusual<sup>1</sup>.

Like hypochondria, cyberchondria occurs when intense health anxiety results from online medical research. Cyberchondria is a condition in which a person obsessively searches the internet for medical information, but rather than finding answers to their worries, believes they have a horrible illness, which makes them feel even more concerned. The preoccupation's distress is severe enough to interfere with work and other duties<sup>2</sup>.

The condition resembles what was formerly known as hypochondria. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, hypochondriasis is no longer a diagnosis (DSM-5). Instead, somatic symptom disorder is thought to be the diagnosis in about 75% of those who had previously been diagnosed with hypochondriasis. The remaining 25% are categorised as having disease anxiety disorder because they have elevated health anxiety in the absence of somatic symptoms<sup>3</sup>.

### Causes of cyberchondria

According to a 2019 study, people with poor self-esteem may be more prone to developing cyberchondria. It may be easier to find medical information online than to speak with a doctor, especially if visiting the doctor makes you anxious. Now you can simply open Google on your phone or computer to search for your symptoms without having to go to the library. It's simple to start worrying about what you're reading because there is so much medical information available and because different sites offer contradictory advice. Concerns about the new-born's health are present<sup>4</sup>.

There are a few risk factors, just like with other types of anxiety.

- Sadness and anxiety already make you more prone to worrying and ruminating, such people may also be more likely to develop cyberchondria.
- If you have personal medical expertise, you may also be more prone to cyberchondria.
- For instance, you might be more concerned about your own health if a death occurs in your family, especially if it is unexpected, or if someone close to you becomes unwell.
- The wellbeing of their infant may cause new parents to experience anxiety<sup>5</sup>.

## Triggers of Cyberchondria

Cyberchondria can have a variety of origins and triggers, from isolated traumatic incidents to long-term untreated stress. Up to 9% of people in the US are thought to have had some level of physical symptom-related worry<sup>6</sup>. Regardless of symptoms, up to 20% of people worry about their health<sup>7</sup>. These figures has been gradually increased in recent years as people started cross checking the latest information about the pandemic COVID-19<sup>8</sup>.

The following are typical cyberchondria causes and triggers<sup>9</sup>:

- A general tendency to worry—roughly 71% of those with cyberchondria also suffer from Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- Chronic unmanaged stress; past trauma or tragedy, whether chronic or acute; close family member (parent, sibling) with an anxiety disorder; or
- Any significant life stressor; Personal or family history of serious illness.
- Negative encounter with a medical professional that resulted in lack of trust or confidence in doctors.
- History of having a serious illness, even if recovered from that illness.
- Need for more support from family or friends.
- Need for more support from family or friends about medical information.

## Cyberchondria symptoms

Being concerned about having a dangerous illness despite having few or no symptoms is a major aspect of cyberchondria.

Cyberchondriacs display the following five traits:

1. Compulsive, undesirable information seeking
2. Distress caused by the searching behaviour, including worry and panic
3. Investing excessive time in online research
4. Looking for confirmation from an authority figure or source
5. Distrust in medical experts whose advice can be sought in person

The following are typical warning signals of cyberchondria:

1. You spend a significant amount of time each day looking online for information about minor health-related symptoms that you are experiencing.
2. You are concerned about having at least one serious illness and possibly several.
3. Searching online makes you feel more anxious rather than less anxious.
4. You experience an increase in heart rate, sweating, or other anxiety-related symptoms when searching.
5. You rely on the veracity and accuracy of information you find online.

acquired personally

Here are some **warning signals** to watch out for, per the Cyberchondria Severity Scale<sup>10</sup> and a 2016 study<sup>11</sup> :

- You spend between one and three hours looking up your symptoms online.
- Rather than making you feel confident or comforted, your online searches make you feel concerned and anxious.
- You find it difficult to resist your compulsive want to look for health-related information.
- You worry about contracting multiple illnesses rather than just one or two.
- You feel the urge to seek assurance from a physician or other medical expert.
- You don't believe the advice a medical expert gives you.
- Even after conducting thorough searches previously, you feel the compulsive desire to check your symptoms online again. You might examine your symptoms four or five times, if not more, on some days.

## Cyberchondria & mental health?

Like illness, anxiety disorder and general anxiety, cyberchondria can influence a person's quality of life, particularly if it is severe. Daily tasks can become more challenging when you're experiencing terrible anxiety. Stress levels can increase because of anxiety. Physical signs of stress and anxiety might include headaches and high blood pressure. Additionally, anxiety can harm your friendships and family ties and harm your career if you end up missing too many days of work for medical appointments. If you request several medical tests, it could even be costly<sup>12</sup>.

## Common Co-Occurring Disorders

The treatment of cyberchondria is complicated by the fact that about two-thirds of people with this type of disorder are likely to have at least one other psychological disorder.

Common coexisting disorders that occur alongside cyberchondria include:

- Somatic Symptom Disorder
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Psychosis
- Certain Personality Disorders (Borderline, Histrionic).

## Strategies for Coping with Cyberchondria

- Coping with cyberchondria requires some self-compassion and a willingness to respond in a new way to health anxiety. Professional help is available for those with persistent or frequent symptoms or excessive anxiety. In addition to considering professional help, there are several coping skills that are helpful in getting through an episode of cyberchondria<sup>13</sup>.

The following six coping mechanisms are effective for those with cyberchondria:

1. **Refrain from Self-Shaming:** Many people who have cyberchondria feel embarrassed or humiliated about their propensity to think they are sick. This shame may intensify the anxiety and even the physical signs of stress.
2. **Practice Self-Compassion:** Your anxieties about your health may be the result of a long-lasting, ingrained anxiety. Although these anxieties can be challenging to comprehend, they are real emotions.
3. **Practice Relaxation Techniques:** Powerful relaxation techniques can be learned on your own. Deep breathing exercises, guided imagery, and muscle-tension relaxation techniques are some of them.
4. **Challenge Your Thoughts About Being Ill:** List your worry, followed by the supporting information.
5. **Consult Your Doctor:** Discuss your worries and your anxiousness with your doctor. If your worries remain, seek medical advice as opposed to drawing judgments about the worst-case possibilities.
6. **Consider the Bigger Picture:** Be aware that a lot of online information is false. Some of it is in fact presented in a way designed to catch your eye and heighten your terror.

## Risks Of Cyberchondria

Having cyberchondria has consequences that can affect our quality of life. For example, some of the consequences you may experience are:

- **Anxiety:** We can't get rid of our anxiety with an internet search. Instead, it may worsen.
- **Medical expenses:** An internet search may suggest costly and unnecessary supplements. The patient may pay more attention to the website than to an actual professional who is suggesting other treatments.
- **Social inequality:** Access to the internet isn't the same all over the world, just like access to healthcare. When both inequalities are combined, low-income groups may look at health topics on free internet services to avoid paying for medical consultation. As a result, they might be putting themselves at risk<sup>14</sup>.

## Important steps to take

- Do some research if you suspect you have cyberchondria. Trusted Source advises against searching for health information online.
- Even though learning about health isn't necessarily dangerous, becoming obsessed with it can cause a lot of anxiety.
- It can be beneficial to carefully select your sources when looking for health information online.
- If you go online, look for well-researched, understandable, and sympathetic sources of information. This can put the prevalence of diseases into perspective.
- Think about discussing your health worry and internet medical information with your primary care physician.
- To understand and control the anxiety that develops around health and medical information, you can also speak with a mental health expert, such as a therapist or counsellor.

## Therapy Options for Cyberchondria & Underlying Conditions

Research has been done to determine the effectiveness of psychotherapy for the symptom identified as “health anxiety.” The following are some types of therapy which have been identified as effective treatments for health anxiety.

- **The use of mindfulness in cognitive therapy (MBCT)**  
For individuals with health anxiety, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) has been shown to be an effective supplement to "standard services." Patients who engaged in MBCT in addition to receiving standard care demonstrated noticeably decreased health anxiety than those who simply got standard care. This improvement was noticeable both right away following treatment and at the one-year follow-up evaluation.
- **Mentalization-Based Cognitive Therapy**  
It has been demonstrated that rational emotive behaviour therapy is useful in teaching people how to react correctly to clear or murky signals coming from their bodies. The goal of teaching client's distraction strategies is to assist them shift their attention away from their health anxiety or symptoms. To control their anxiousness and any physical side effects, they also learn relaxation techniques.
- **Medication**  
The obsessive thoughts associated with Cyberchondria, and Illness Anxiety Disorder have been successfully managed with medications such selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs). The similarities between OCD and cyberchondria/illness anxiety disorder serves as the foundation for this therapy. The obsessive and compulsive components of cyberchondria may be lessened by the same drugs that are effective in treating OCD<sup>15</sup>.

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