

# BRUNCH

Wellness

## NET GAIN (OR LOSS)

Online health information can be useful – but it could also be wrong

by Dr Vikram Jaggi

**T**HE BREADTH and depth of the information on the Net is breathtaking! Recent data from an insurance company from India reveals that more than one third Indians (39 per cent) go online for health information. Just like everything else in life, this too has its pros and cons.

### THE POSITIVES

- A smart and savvy patient can very quickly look up the information that he/she is seeking.
- This info is usually very up to date.
- If this matches with what has been told by the doctor, it is a great relief to the patient.
- I see many asthma patients. Asthma requires a lot of precautions to be taken by the patient. All these are easily available on the Net. It saves the doctor-patient time. The time that a patient has with a doctor is usually 10-20 minutes. I often give patients links to good websites where this kind of info is available.

### THE NEGATIVES

- **CYBERCHONDRIACS:** Many patients, some of whom already have a hypochondriac streak, become more paranoid by incessantly looking up disease and drug-related issues on the Net. Drugs can have possible side effects. These are listed on the Net. By going over this list, such patients either worry excessively or simply stop taking the medicine – both with bad



PHOTOS: THINKSTOCK

consequences. Sometimes patients look up symptoms to self diagnose their condition. If they have a chronic cough, the list of possible causes from the Net would invariably include lung cancer – and they convince themselves that that's what they have.

- **CRANKS:** The Net is full of cranks! A crank, to me, is a person who first makes an opinion, and looks for facts to fit his thesis. Examples: 'drinking ginger and honey cured my asthma.'

- **HOAXES:** Some medical hoaxes are meant to scare. Example: drinking water from plastic bottles can cause cancer; infected needles stuck in cinema hall seats can transmit HIV etc. Others give false hope. Example: A detailed concoction to cure diabetes, complete with the name of the doctor who did this 'research'. Deeper digging revealed that no such doctor exists. Many websites quote dubious studies or data. I am surprised at the number of intelligent people who fall for these.

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### USE THE NET WITH REASON

- Visit reliable sites. Urls ending with .edu (education – usually universities or hospitals), .org (organisation – usually NGOs) or .gov (government sites) are likely to be

reliable. Sites ending with .com are commercial sites.

- Be sceptical of sites that offer to cure chronic diseases.
- Be sceptical of sites with too many patient stories of miracles.
- Verify the info with your doctor. A good doctor will clarify things for you. If he consistent-

ly disregards this, maybe it is time to change your doctor!

- Forums are good places to learn about a condition via people who are in the same boat as you. But beware: many seemingly independent forums are managed by interested drug companies.

