

# The Internet: Friend or Foe When Providing Patient Education?

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The Internet has changed how patients with cancer learn about and cope with their disease. Newly diagnosed patients with cancer often have complex educational and informational needs related to diagnosis and treatment. Nurses frequently encounter time and work-related constraints that can interfere with the provision of patient education. They are challenged to educate patients in an environment of rapidly expanding and innovative computer technology. Barriers that hinder nurses in integrating educational Internet resources into patient care include lack of training, time constraints, and inadequate administrative support. Advantages of Internet use for patient education and support include wide-ranging and current information, a variety of teaching formats, patient empowerment, new communication options, and support 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Pitfalls associated with Internet use for patients with cancer include inaccurate information, lack of access, poor quality of online resources, and security and privacy issues. Nurses routinely use computer technology in the workplace and follow rigorous security and privacy standards to protect patient information. Those skills can provide the foundation for the use of online sources for patient teaching. Nurses play an important role in helping patients evaluate the veracity of online information and introducing them to reliable Internet resources.

**T**he Internet did not exist publicly before 1991 (Penson, Benson, Parles, Chabner, & Lynch, 2002). In 2007, 71% of American adults accessed the Internet and 80% of Internet users searched for health information online (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2007).

Although patients report that physicians are their most highly trusted source of health information, only 10.9% contacted their physicians initially for information, whereas 48.6% chose online sources first (Hesse et al., 2005).

Health-related Internet surfing is, in part, driven by cost-cutting measures instituted by insurance companies. A self-directed approach implies that patients are more informed in their health care (Bessell et al., 2002). Consumer-directed health plans that in theory should drive down healthcare costs have not (Kelley & Attridge, 2006). Although information technology may help consumers make better choices about health care, using the Internet to access health-related information can be challenging (Gomella, Albertsen, Benson, Forman, & Soloway, 2000; Stokowski, 2004).

Patient education is one of the most important and challenging services that nurses provide to patients. The provider-patient relationship has shifted away from a paternalistic approach to one incorporating patients in decision making (Dickerson, Boehmke, Ogle, & Brown, 2005). The welfare of patients may depend on timely and accurate information. Nurses should be prepared to help patients locate, evaluate, and use information available on the Internet. Are they ready to do so?

## At a Glance

- ◆ Patients with cancer are using the Internet as a resource for information about their disease and treatment.
- ◆ The Internet provides resources for nurses that can be used for individualized patient teaching.
- ◆ Instructing patients about effectively accessing information on the Internet is integral to oncology nurses' roles as patient educators and advocates.

## Nursing Challenges in Providing Quality Patient Education

Newly diagnosed patients with cancer often have complex educational and informational needs and may be expected

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