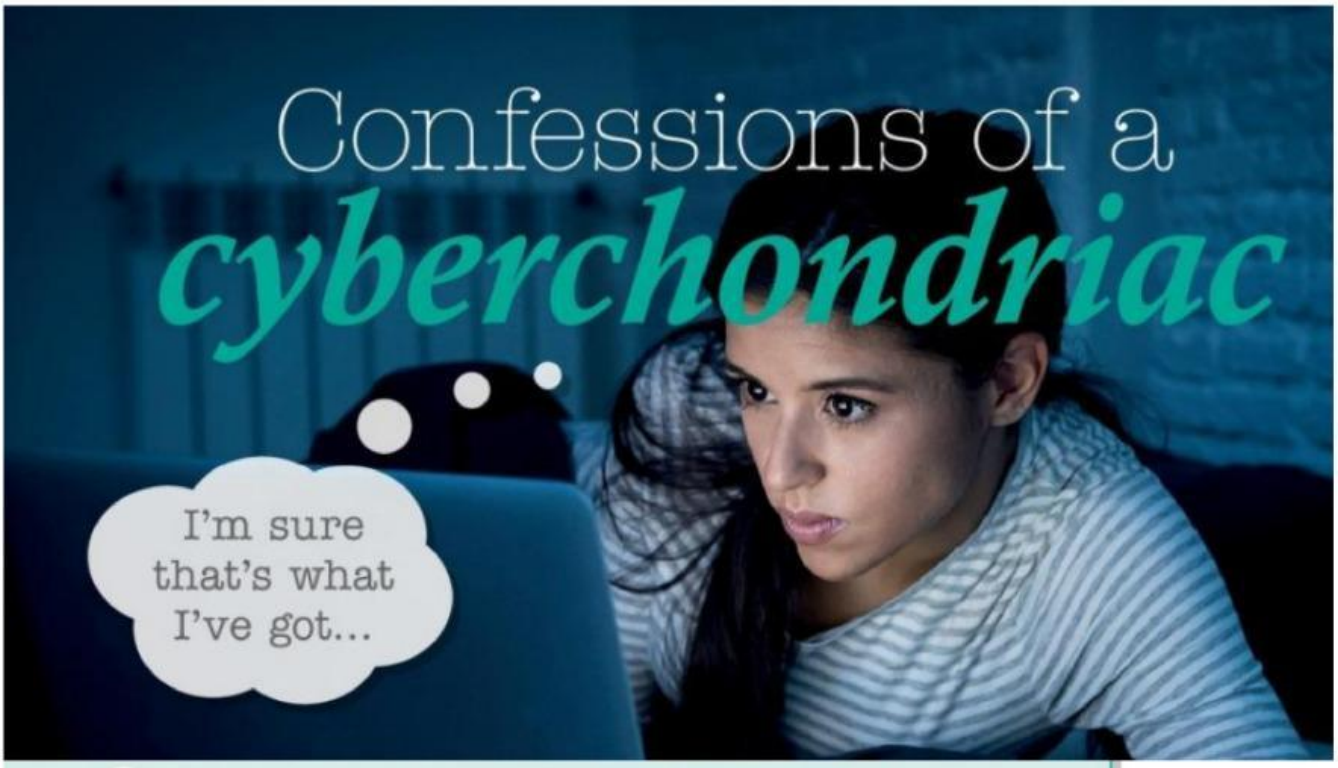


1 **A few weeks ago,** I was feeling under the weather. After days of intensive internet diagnosis, I finally went to see my doctor. After examining me, she told me that my heart rate was a bit fast and sent me off to the hospital for some tests. Did I go straight there? Of course not. First I took out my phone, logged on to Google, and found out that the technical term for a fast heart rate is *supraventricular tachycardia*. Then I typed these two words into Google. Sadly, the problem with Dr Google is that he isn't exactly a comfort in times of crisis. One website immediately scared me with a list of 407 possible causes.



2 I raced to the hospital, convinced that I probably needed open-heart surgery. Four hours later, I got a diagnosis. I had a chest infection…and a bad case of *cyberchondria*. The only consolation for the latter condition is that I'm in good company. A Microsoft survey of one million internet users last year found that 2% of all searches – a not-insignificant number – were health-related.

3 Unfortunately, once you have it, cyberchondria can be hard to cure. Since my trip to hospital, I have been obsessively checking my pulse, swapping symptoms in chat rooms, and reading all about worst-case scenarios. What if the doctors got it wrong? What if the ECG machine was faulty? It's exhausting trying to convince yourself that you might have a life-threatening illness.

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4 The Microsoft study also revealed another serious problem – that online information often doesn't discriminate between common and very rare conditions. One in four of all articles thrown up by an internet search for *headache* suggested a brain tumour as a possible cause. Although it is true that this may be the cause, in fact, brain tumours develop in fewer than one in 50,000 people. People also assume that the first answers that come up in searches refer to the most common causes, so if you type in *mouth ulcer* and see that *mouth cancer* has several mentions near the top, you think that it must be very common. However, this is not the case at all.

5 Another problem for cyberchondriacs is that online medical information may be from an unreliable source, or out of date. A recent American study showed that 75% of the people who use the internet to look up information about their health do not check where that information came from, or the date it was created. 'Once something has been put up on the internet, even if it's wrong, it's difficult to remove,' says Sarah Jarvis, a doctor. 'This is a problem, especially with scare stories, and also with some alternative remedies which claim to be miracle cures, but which may actually do you harm.' Check the information? Sorry, I don't have time – I'm off to buy a heart-rate monitor!

Adapted from The Sunday Times

Glossary

ECG machine electrocardiogram machine, used to test people's heart rate

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Now read each paragraph again carefully and choose a, b, or c.

1 The problem with Dr Google is that the information is _____.

a insufficient b worrying c false

2 Microsoft's survey discovered that _____ searches are to do with health.

a very few
b quite a lot of
c the majority of

3 The information the writer has found since coming back from hospital has _____.

a made her cyberchondria worse
b made no difference to her cyberchondria
c cured her cyberchondria

4 One of the problems with internet searches is that they _____.

a don't rank answers in order of probability
b only focus on common illnesses
c don't always give an answer

5 Most people are unlikely to check _____ health information was posted.

a why and by who
b how and when
c when and by who

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