



## **Sue Ann Says: The Internet is a Powerful Health Resource**

Back when I was diagnosed with cancer over a decade ago, I would have had a good laugh if you'd told me I would be chatting with other breast cancer patients around the world— on my computer. Or researching the latest medical advances at 3 a.m., when I was worrying about some new pain or twitch and couldn't sleep. All my life, I'd taken my symptoms to the doctor and put myself in his hands. The doctor told me what to do, and I did it .... or not. Today, we are empowered with information so we can take an active role in our own health. We can communicate effectively with our doctors, make informed decisions about our treatment and curtail our risk for disease. And all of these capabilities are right at our fingertips through the Internet.

But how do we know if the information can be trusted? And, most importantly, how do we know when to turn off the computer and get ourselves to the doctor?

I learned a lot about how we can use the Internet to improve our health from Dr. Lori DuBenske, a researcher at the UW Madison Center for Health Enhancement Systems Studies. (Whew! That's a mouthful, so we'll just call it CHESS.) Her work connects patients and their physicians via the Internet to improve health outcomes. CHESS is currently testing a comprehensive Web site that provides lung cancer patients, their families, and clinical team with a common network to exchange valuable information and support. All material on the site is developed by health experts specifically for the CHESS program and, because it's Internet accessible, it works for the patients on their own, terms 24/7.\*

Lori told me that the Internet is a powerful resource in supplying information, support and decision-making tools. Web sites can provide information about anything from pink eye to cardiovascular disease. We can research our symptoms and come up with a list of questions to take to our doctor. We can learn how to prevent illness by making appropriate lifestyle changes to reduce our risk factors. Blogs can be an outlet to share personal experiences with people going through the same thing. Online resources even offer algorithms to help us make treatment decisions – just type in your symptoms, follow the prompts, and you receive personalized feedback to help make a decision.

“This is what makes the Internet different from a self-help book,” Lori told me. “The Internet is able to interact with you and provide a response specific to your input.”

But we have to be careful, Lori warns. All Web sites aren't created equal. How can we judge what information is credible and accurate? She offers these tips:

- Know who is behind the Web site. Government and research organizations are generally the most credible. Be wary of sites sponsored by pharmaceutical organizations or groups with a vested interest; they may skew the information to put their products or services in a better light.
- Check multiple sites for information about the same topic. From site to site, the food pyramid will be the same, but tips on an effective diet will vary widely.
- Look at when the information was last updated to be sure the information is still the most current knowledge. Medical science changes so rapidly; information becomes out of date very quickly.
- And, most importantly: know when to consult your physician.

“People often turn to the Internet for medical advice. But it doesn't stand in for a face-to-face examination with your own physician,” Lori said. “The problem with using the Internet for health advice is that people often misdiagnose themselves, or act on misinformation, which can have serious consequences.”

So when does Lori advise turning from computer to physician? “The instant you think, ‘hmmmm, maybe I should see a doctor,’ that’s when you go,” Lori emphasized.

What if, like me, you're a woman of “a certain age” and the Internet is one big mystery? Learn how to use it! Ask your children or – better yet – grandchildren, to give you lessons until you're adept. Community centers offer classes on the using the Internet too if you family lives farther away. It's really not so hard to learn and it offers us a wealth of information. “The Internet opens the whole world up to us,” Lori says. “This can be especially valuable to older people who may feel isolated.”

If you're not computer savvy, make the decision and the time to learn basic skills. When you frequent health Web sites, remember to seek sites that are credible, correct and current. The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation's Web site, at [www.wwhf.org](http://www.wwhf.org), is a great place to start finding credible, current women's health information. And most of all: know when to see your physician. The information you access on the Internet can help you actively promote your own health and that of your family and friends. Because, it all begins with a healthy woman

Yours in good health,

Sue Ann Thompson  
*Founder & President*  
*Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation*

*The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF) is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF presents women's health education and outreach programs, funds women's health research, provides scholarships for women in academic medicine, and publishes resource*

*materials. Your donations help the Foundation reach women all over Wisconsin with the information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more about WWHF visit [www.wwhf.org](http://www.wwhf.org) or call 1-800-448-5148.*

*\* All CHESS programs are clinical trials. If you'd like more information, contact Lori DuBenske at 608-265-4088.*