

Google, a medical search engine?

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Whilst Google is not primarily a medical search engine, doctors and patients use it continually for their internet searches related to illnesses and health (1).

When used properly, the internet empowers both patient and doctors and may improve the quality of care.

Tang H, NG JH. Use of Google as a diagnostic aid: Authors' reply to responses. BMJ 2006, 333: 1270

What are the possibilities and the limits of Google in medicine? An attempt at an answer ...

First of all there is not only one Google, but a number of Googles: Google, Google Scholar, Google Health, Google Images, etc. Each of these versions has its own specificities, its uses. To learn more, read "The different versions of Google".

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The studies which have compared the clinical usefulness of the different sources of information available on the internet are rare (2). To our knowledge no survey exists which has compared Google to other sources of information available on the internet in respect of clinical questions.

A search on PubMed with the term "Google" returns more than 300 listings, but the majority of these 300 articles are in reality works for which Google was used as a tool for bibliographic search. In this sense, one can say that Google and Google Scholar are used in medicine as tools for searches of medical literature.

Only a minority of these publications have studied the use of Google in a clinical situation.

The study "Google Scholar : A source for clinicians ?" (3) is a presentation of the different sources of information available on the internet. The authors conclude that clinicians will continue to prefer data bases such as TRIP Database, The Cochrane Library or UpToDate for their searches.

The article "... And a diagnostic test was performed " (4) which appeared in the New England Journal of Medicine presents the case of a young doctor diagnosing a rare illness after having simply introduced the patient's symptoms into Google. Google can therefore be useful in medicine for very precise questions.

The study "Googling for a diagnosis" appeared in the British Medical Journal (5). The author's viewpoint is that Google is particularly a tool that helps the doctor formulate a differential diagnosis. In the article which was published in response to the critiques and which appeared following their study (6), the authors recall that the majority of clinical questions can be found in PubMed, The Cochrane Library, the medical journals or UpToDate but it would be wrong in their opinion to not use the web if the traditional sources of information provide no answer.

We are in an apparently paradoxical situation: Google is being used daily by patients and health care professionals across the planet and yet no study has been carried out to prove its usefulness. The work which is currently available is in our opinion simplistic. It is true that a study of the usefulness of Google would not be simple, particularly because of its extremely heterogeneous content.

It appears however obvious that Google is not only a tool useful for rare illnesses and different diagnoses. We must not forget that internet users are not only asking complex medical questions. For simple searches, Google is certainly also a useful tool. If you are a doctor and you no longer remember the diagnostic criteria of the hemochromatosis - simply enter "diagnosis" and "hemochromatosis" into Google, you will obtain the result in a second (at the time of writing this text, the answer can be found in the 2nd link at the address www.emedicine.com)

Google is free and easy to use. The Mountain View search engine has a certain number of limitations. There is obviously the problem of the large quantity of information found, this problem is however

mitigated by the fact that Google succeeds in classifying the documents according to their relevance. Another limit of Google is that it only gives access to the "visible web". Certain information is never found by Google because the search engine does not see it: such as content protected by the publishers or the content of data bases (a limitation which Google Scholar and Google Print attempts to overcome).

With regard to the comparison Google / Google Health, opinions are divided. Some swear by the "standard" Google, others by Google Health. To test...

Even if we lack at the moment a study providing conclusive proof we are convinced that Google is a search engine that can be used in medicine, including by health care professionals?

Read also about the use of Google by doctors:

- Kevin, M.D. - Medical Blog. How do I use Google ?
- Dimov V. How doctors use Google. Clinical Cases and Images—Blog. 15 Jun 2005.