

# Medical Tools

*Looking for health information online?*

*Try these new Web sites.*

By Jeanette Borzo

**F**EW TOOLS online are more popular—and more frustrating—than those that offer information about health and medicine.

A full 71% of online users turn to their computers to research health issues, according to 2006 research from JupiterKagan Inc.'s JupiterResearch. Among online users age 55 and older, 27% said they relied more on the Internet for health information than they did a year earlier.

But a quarter of consumers who look for health information online say they are overwhelmed by the information they find, according to a survey last August from the Pew Internet and American Life Project in Washington.

With that in mind, a handful of start-ups in recent months have introduced search engines dedicated to health topics. (Some big players are getting involved, as well: Microsoft Corp. earlier this year bought one of the start-ups, Medstory Inc. of Foster City, Calif.) We looked at a half-dozen of the newest sites. At the same time, we asked for some opinions from health professionals about the best ways to research health topics online.

## The Basics

Most people searching for health information online use general-interest search engines (like Google or Yahoo) or health portals such as the popular WebMD (webmd.com) and MSN Health & Fitness (health.msn.com) or the new Revolution Health (revolutionhealth.com). Portals generally include search functions but are more like online guidebooks in that they gather and categorize content they think will interest users: health news, ratings for doctors or hospitals, guides to chronic conditions or content that the portals themselves create, for example.

Several of the new search sites may contain one or more of these features common to portals, but all focus, first and foremost, on search. Because of that focus, in many cases they give users access to a broader swath of information than portals.

No one health-search site will be best for everyone. Deciding which, if any, of the new online options will work for you depends in large part on your personal prefer-

ences concerning the way the sites are laid out, their navigation features and the information they provide.

For instance, Medstory.com was quick to find complete information about procedures for diagnosing celiac disease (a chronic inflammatory disorder of the small intestine) that some sites failed to find. But we didn't like it that Medstory's results for a "sore throat" search started with a Wikipedia article, rather than a more authoritative source. And while we didn't have much use for many of the information filters (based on age, ethnicity, etc.) at Healia Inc.'s healia.com, we liked how this was one of the few engines that returned a link for the Celiac Sprue Association, a key American organization for those with the disease.

"It is very hard to find the one path or search engine to get the perfect results," says Monique Levy, a senior analyst at JupiterResearch in New York. "Use several. Experiment."

Also keep in mind that these sites are evolving all the time, so the setup you encountered or the search results you got last week might be different a month from now. For instance, a later "sore throat" search on Medstory produced very different results. It might pay to check in on the various sites occasionally to see if they have changed.

A central challenge for these sites and their users is locating reliable information. You can, of course, do the sifting yourself. Professional sources, such as the Journal of the American Medical Association, are likely to be more reliable in health matters than general-interest publications, says Benjamin Kligler, associate professor of medicine at New York's Albert Einstein College of Medicine.

But if you don't want to 'second-guess' your search results, you can also stick to sites that search only select health sources (such as mammahealth.com, owned by Mamma.com Inc.) or that categorize search results based on their origin. Healthline Networks Inc.'s healthline.com and TauMed Inc.'s taumed.com, for example, segregate results, keeping licensed content from medical publishers apart from search results culled from generally available Web content. Healthline and Healia also list quality ratings for some of their results.

Dr. Kligler also recommends keeping an eye out for medical sites with commercial sponsors. "If a site is clearly sponsored by a pharmaceutical company, you have to real-

ize that this is one perspective" that you may want to balance with other perspectives, he says.

## Test Drive

We ran a variety of searches on six sites. Aside from some of the different approaches we've already outlined, one key difference among the sites lies in how they return search results.

Overall, we found the search results at MammaHealth, for example, most resembled what you get at a general-interest search engine, only they were labeled by categories, such as Definition, Causes, News and so forth. This saved us a lot of time we might otherwise have spent clicking on unhelpful results.

The other sites use many of the same headings to categorize search results but generally offer more options for exploration. Enter "arthritis" in the health search engine at Kosmix Corp.'s kosmix.com, for example, and you'll see nine topics (such as potential risks, drugs, and herbs and supplements) to explore under an Explore Connections heading. More results are categorized under other headings, including Basic Reading and Blogs.

At Medstory, a "hip replacement" search returned a standard list of results but with the option to call up more precise results by clicking through categories such as Conditions, Procedures, Clinical Studies, Complementary Medicine and more, each with multiple subcategories beneath them. There are also icons to direct you to results in news articles, clinical trials or research articles.

Healia has a similar approach in that it returns a traditional list of search results but lets you refine some searches by clicking on a variety of tabs toward the top of the screen labeled Prevention, Causes/Risks, Symptoms, Diagnosis/Tests and Treatment.

Healthline also offers a HealthMap with each set of search results, which lays out a variety of different avenues of exploration. The HealthMap for Meniere's disease (a condition characterized by recurrent vertigo, hearing loss and other symptoms), for example, has clickable boxes for Symptoms, Causes, Diagnosis and other topics.

TauMed, meanwhile, offers a variety of additional search terms related to Meniere's, such as inner ear, tinnitus and vertigo. TauMed also has a helpful feature for searching within your results for additional terms. For example, after searching for information on menopause, you could ask for only the menopause results that include information about hot flashes.

For us, the key with all the sites is experimentation. Many features weren't self-evident, revealing themselves only as we clicked around the site. At that point, we found ourselves impressed with the extensive features and functions we discovered. As Dr. Kligler notes, "Patients have found things on the Web that have been tremendously helpful to them that I would never have found." ■