

Using Technology? Positively!

A SERIES OF FACT SHEETS

ON EVERYDAY TECHNOLOGIES AND OLDER CANADIANS

FOR THE GOOD OF YOUR HEALTH: TECHNOLOGY AND HEALTH CARE

Fact sheet #5 looks at how technology affects access to health information and care and offers some tips in assessing that information.

Technology has significantly changed health care in Canada. It affects the way we get health information and how we use it. From contacting your doctor to delivering health services over great distances, technology is making a difference. There are increasing opportunities to get more information about your own health issues. But there may also be more confusion about the methods of getting information and the accuracy of the information.

Using the Internet to Get Health Information

Some research claims that as many as two thirds of internet users have sought health care information online. Online support and discussion groups can provide comfort and valuable

information. However, the internet cannot replace face-to-face contact with health professionals. It is important to keep your doctor informed of any changes in your health.

Some Cautions About Health Information on the Internet...

The internet is a rich source of health information, but it is unregulated. Some information is wrong, while other information is confusing or could take advantage of vulnerable people by promoting or selling useless products or worse, harmful advice. Ask a health professional as well as friends and family about information you find on the internet. Here are some specific guidelines that can help you to decide which information is trustworthy.

Guidelines to reliable health information on the internet:

- ◆ Look for the author's name, professional standing and contact information.
- ◆ Any information should be current with the last update of the web site noted.
- ◆ There should be clearly stated cautions on the site. For example, it should note that the information is not a substitute for visiting a physician.
- ◆ Any commercial sponsorship or fees should be clearly stated.
- ◆ Check with your physician, local seniors' organization or provincial/territorial department of health for listings of reliable web sites.

Check out the Canadian Health Network's web site for reliable health information and more detailed checklists to help you evaluate the information you find. Their web site address is: <http://www.canadian-health-network.ca>

An **Emergency Response Monitoring Device** is a small device often worn around the neck or clipped onto your clothing. The client can press it if she/he needs help. Once the device is pressed, it sends a signal to a small in-home communicator, which then notifies a response centre. A staff member at the centre notifies a relative, a neighbour or sends an ambulance to check on the client. In most areas, this service is available for a reasonable fee.

How has making a doctor's appointment changed?

Many doctors' and other professionals' offices now use an **automated voice response (AVR)** system to book or direct calls (**See fact sheet #2 for information on AVRs**). You may have to choose from a list of options before you speak to a receptionist. Sometimes, you have to wait until the receptionist can take your call. It helps to write down your main points before you phone, and have your health card numbers ready as well as a pen and paper handy to jot down any information you may be given.

Other Ways to Access Health Information

In some areas, providing health services using a computer network, video-conferencing or teleconferencing for example, has been a great success. In many rural areas of Canada, however, access to such technology is not yet available or needs upgrading. As technology continues to develop, these challenges will be overcome.

Even if you don't use the internet yourself, health care professionals and caregivers can benefit from the internet's rich scope of information. This option has the potential to make it easier for health care providers to exchange information, clinical expertise, diagnostic tests and results.

Contact your local health department to find out what is happening in your area.

Sources:

- Industry Canada. *Reports on the Telehealth Industry in Canada*. Retrieved March 12, 2001 from <http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/SSG/it05497c.html>.
- Health Canada. Information, Analysis and Connectivity Branch. Office of Health and the Information Highway. *Information and Communications Technologies for Better Health*. Ottawa, 2000.
- Cubberly, Maureen and Stan Skrzyszewski. Seniors' Connectivity: Health and the Internet. In *Background Papers: Seniors' Connectivity Strategy*. Prepared for Information Highway Applications Branch, Industry Canada, September 2000.
- Canadian Health Network web site, <http://www.canadian-health-network.ca/html/help/netinfoe.html>. Retrieved April 2001.

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Techno Terms

AVR - an **Automated Voice Response System** is an electronic telephone answering service used by many companies to direct your call to the appropriate person or department and increasingly, by medical and professional offices to book appointments. Most use a 'menu' style, in which you make your choices by pressing the buttons on your phone. This system does not work with a rotary telephone.

Electronic Health Record (EHR) - electronic versions of individual patient records including medical history and test results. EHRs enable medical information to be sent between different geographical locations electronically (e.g. from the hospital to the doctor's office).

Emergency Response Monitoring Device - a small electronic device often worn around the neck or clipped to clothing and pressed by the wearer if she/he needs help. It sends a signal to a response centre which then notifies a relative, a neighbour or sends an ambulance to check on the client. In some areas, this service is available for a fee.

Internet - a very large computer network through which individual computers are connected to internet service providers (ISP) so they can share information. The internet is open to anyone with access to a computer that is connected to an ISP.

Online - the condition of being connected to a computer or a telecommunications system. The term is frequently used to describe someone who is currently connected to the internet.

Tele-Homecare - provides healthcare practitioners with a way to monitor, and provide care and education to patients in their homes. Using telecommunications technology, such as the internet, the tele-homecare system allows healthcare providers to communicate with patients as frequently as necessary.

Telemedicine - also known as **telehealth**, it is the use of information technology or computer networks to deliver health services and information over distances. Tele-homecare, video-conferencing and electronic health records are all components of telehealth and use information technology in delivering their service.

Video-Conferencing - allows people in vastly different places to communicate together by hearing and seeing one another in rooms specially equipped with microphones, speakers, cameras, and projection equipment. Two-way interactive video uses telephone lines to transmit live video, sound, and still pictures all at the same time.