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SHORT COMMUNICATION

Debunking the Dilemma: Is Cyberchondria Truly a Form of Hypochondria?

Gopal Singh Charan[1], Manisha Singh Palawat[2], Raman Kalia[3], Akashpreet Kaur[4], Hardeep Kaur[5]

[1]Department of Pediatric Nursing, SGRD College of Nursing, SGRD University of Health Sciences, Amritsar, [2]Department of Psychiatric, SMS Medical College and Hospital, Jaipur, Rajasthan, [3]Department of Medical Surgical Nursing, Saraswati Nursing Institute, Kurali, [4]Department of Critical Care Nursing, SGRD College of Nursing, SGRD University of Health Sciences, Amritsar, [5]Department of Community Health Nursing, University College of Nursing, Baba Farid University of Health Sciences, Faridkot, Punjab, India

In today's digital age, the Internet has become an integral part of our lives, providing a wealth of information at our fingertips. However, the ease of accessing medical information online has given rise to a new phenomenon known as cyberchondria (CCD). CCD is characterized by the excessive anxiety and worry caused by the information discovered on the internet, leading individuals to believe that they have a serious medical condition. Although it shares similarities with hypochondria or illness anxiety disorder, there is an ongoing debate about whether CCD should be regarded as a separate condition or simply a manifestation of preexisting hypochondria. Those who engage in self-diagnosis and self-management of their health concerns without confirming the accuracy of the published material are presumed to be affected by CCD. No research has yet been undertaken on CCD therapeutic approaches. Psychoeducation is the cornerstone of CCD therapy. There is no specific pharmaceutical therapy. CCD is a developing public mental health concern in India that needs prompt response or might seriously harm the general public.

Key words: Cyberchondria, hypochondria, internet, anxiety, cognitive-behavioral therapy, digital health literacy

INTRODUCTION

The Internet serves as a crucial reservoir of health information, reaching approximately 4.93 billion users worldwide, with a predominant user base in Asia (51.8%), followed by Europe (14.8%) and Africa (12.8%). With a global internet penetration rate of 63.2%, it has become an effective medium for information dissemination.[1] India, boasting 504 million active users, exemplifies the Internet's role in delivering engaging content on health and wellness. It has transformed into a primary source of health-related information, seamlessly integrated into the daily routines of countless individuals.[2]

Cyberchondria (CCD) arises when individuals self-diagnose and manage health issues solely through unverified internet information, resembling modern hypochondriasis. Coined in 2002, the term blends "cyber" and "hypochondriasis," signifying an Internet-induced form of the condition. CCD is the digital counterpart of hypochondriasis.[3] Evidence shows that 41.7% to 76.9% of Internet users seek health information, often leading to alarming conclusions. This causes psychological distress and increased medical costs. Surprisingly, 34% use social media, while Wikipedia and online forums are key health resources for adults.[4-7]

PREVALENCE

CCD is a growing mental health concern in India, affecting approximately 55.6% of the population.[5] Research shows that 42.5% experience significant impacts, with 28.0% reporting moderate effects. The Internet's global reach makes CCD a worldwide issue spanning from teenagers to adults. Studies indicate that 50% to 56% of Internet users seek health advice support or schedule medical appointments online.[8-10]

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Corresponding Author: Prof. Gopal Singh Charan, Department of Pediatric Nursing, SGRD College of Nursing, SGRD University of Health Sciences, Amritsar - 143 501, Punjab, India. Tel: +91-978-043-0871; Fax: 0183-287-0205. E-mail: pedslove@gmail.com

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FACTORS

CCD is a complex phenomenon influenced by numerous factors. It is essential to grasp these contributing factors to understand how CCD develops and persists over time.

Demographic factors

Previous studies have identified gender, age, educational level, or financial status as potential risk factors of CCD.[11]

Information overload

The Internet provides overwhelming health-related information, making distinguishing between reliable sources and misinformation challenging. This overload leads to confusion and heightened anxiety excessive health-related searches.

Fear of uncertainty

One of the major catalysts of CCD is the fear of uncertainty. People often turn to the Internet in search of answers and reassurance when experiencing unexplained symptoms or concerns about their health. The need for immediate answers intensifies anxiety and fuels relentless online searches, sustaining anxiety in the long run.

Accessibility anonymity

The accessibility anonymity provided by the Internet plays a significant role in the emergence and perpetuation of CCD. Unlike traditional health-care settings, the Internet allows individuals to seek health information anytime from the comfort of their homes without any barriers. The ease of access to vast amounts of medical information empowers individuals to engage in self-diagnosis, leading to heightened anxiety distress.

Confirmation bias

Individuals unconsciously search for information that confirms their fears and worries, creating a distorted perception of symptoms and reinforcing the belief of having a serious medical condition.

Previous medical experiences

Both negative experiences with health-care professionals or diagnoses and previous encounters with major illnesses can significantly impact an individual's trust in the medical system. These experiences may drive individuals to seek control and accurate information online. The fear of repeating past negative experiences or heightened sensitivity to new physical symptoms can fuel excessive online searches.[11]

Anxiety personality traits

Preexisting anxiety disorders and traits such as perfectionism and neuroticism contribute to heightened health-related worries and compulsive online searching. These traits, combined with internet accessibility, increase vulnerability to CCD.[12]

Media influence

Media portrayal of health-related issues and sensationalized stories can also contribute to CCD. The media often emphasizes worst-case scenarios presenting medical information sensationalized, which can trigger fear obsession in susceptible individuals. This sensationalism and easy access to online news articles and social media platforms can intensify CCD by constantly bombarding individuals with alarming health-related content.[12]

Lack of health literacy

Limited health literacy, including insufficient knowledge about medical terminology, understanding of research methodology critical evaluation skills, can contribute to CCD. The lack of health literacy leaves individuals susceptible to misinformation, leading to heightened anxiety and misguided self-diagnosis.

Social environmental factors

The emergence of CCD is also influenced by societal environmental elements. Peer influence social comparison can contribute to heightened health anxiety, especially when individuals observe others engaging in excessive health-related searches or sharing alarming health-related information online.[11] A study revealed heightened Internet use among those with specific health issues such as illness, treatment, diet, supplements, or addiction recovery. Fifty-seven percent searched for others. Surprisingly, 75% do not verify website credibility, causing anxiety due to misinformation.[13]

DIAGNOSIS CLINICAL APPEARANCE

The Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5 does not list CCD. Despite the widespread belief that CCD is a form of hypochondriasis health anxiety, there is currently no consensus on this matter.[14]

A comprehensive evaluation by a qualified health-care professional is necessary for diagnosing CCD. The diagnosis depends on the clinical judgment, considering the severity and persistence of symptoms. The health-care provider will conduct a thorough assessment, taking into account the individual's medical history, psychological symptoms online behavior patterns. Various scales, such as the Cyberchondria Severity Scale and Internet Health Anxiety Scale, assess

CCD severity and health-related anxiety. The Whiteley Index predicts increased anxiety from online symptom searching. These tools aid clinicians in diagnosing and treating CCD effectively. It is crucial to rule out other medical or mental health conditions that may resemble or contribute to CCD. When diagnosing CCD, health-care professionals typically follow a comprehensive evaluation process and consider exclusion criteria to rule out other medical or mental health conditions that may resemble or contribute to CCD. Here are some examples of conditions that should be considered for exclusion when making a diagnosis of CCD. For example, generalized anxiety disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

The following conditions must be met to meet the diagnostic criteria for anxiety disorder with a CCD subtype: CCD manifests through compulsive health-related searches, as individuals spend significant time self-diagnosing, seeking validation from various medical websites. Those affected frequently seek medical consultations to alleviate their concerns, visiting multiple health-care professionals for reassurance. However, even after receiving validation, individuals with CCD remain unconvinced to continue their excessive online searches, trapped in a cycle of anxiety and uncertainty.

A hallmark of CCD is the compulsive need to search for health-related information online. They may quickly jump to conclusions, associating mild symptoms with serious medical conditions. They may match their symptoms to various medical conditions, disregarding the possibility of benign explanations. Confirmation bias plays a significant role, as individuals tend to selectively focus on information that supports their self-diagnoses, reinforcing their beliefs and intensifying their health-related worries. In addition, the person has anxiety, distress, and impaired functioning in work, relationships leisure activities. They may experience difficulty concentrating, insomnia, and social withdrawal, leading to a decline in overall functioning and well-being.

TREATMENT APPROACHES

No research has yet been undertaken on specific pharmaceutical therapy. However, it requires a multidimensional approach that combines psychological interventions, education, and prevention strategies.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy

Evidence-based treatment approaches offer significant relief from symptoms, including psychopharmacology and are widely recognized as an effective treatment for various anxiety disorders, including CCD. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) aids individuals in recognizing and addressing negative thought patterns and cognitive distortions associated with health anxiety. Individuals learn to replace catastrophic thinking with more realistic and balanced thoughts through cognitive restructuring. Furthermore, behavioral techniques, such as exposure response prevention, assist individuals in gradually reducing compulsive online searching and reassurance-seeking behaviors. CBT equips individuals with coping strategies to effectively manage anxiety and uncertainty, empowering them to break free from the cycle of CCD.[15,16]

Mindfulness-based interventions

Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs), including practices such as mindfulness meditation and acceptance-based approaches, hold the potential to manage anxiety and alleviate concerns related to health effectively. Mindfulness practices encourage individuals to cultivate present-moment awareness and nonjudgmental acceptance of their thoughts and bodily sensations. Individuals can reduce anxiety and develop a healthier relationship with their thoughts and bodily sensations by developing a compassionate, nonreactive stance toward their health concerns. MBI can complement other treatment approaches, helping individuals build resilience and cope with uncertainty.[17]

Psychoeducation

Psychoeducation is an essential component in the treatment of CCD. Educating individuals about the potential risks and benefits of seeking health information online helps them better understand the Internet's role in their health management. Psychoeducation teaches individuals to critically evaluate online health information, identify reliable sources, and distinguish between evidence-based information. By empowering individuals with digital health literacy skills, they can make informed decisions and avoid the trap of excessive compulsive online searching.[18]

Therapist-guided internet use

As the Internet is a primary source of anxiety for individuals with CCD, therapist-guided Internet use can be an effective intervention. The therapist collaborates with the individual to establish guidelines and boundaries for online health-related searches. This approach involves setting specific time limits for Internet use, guiding individuals toward reputable evidence-based websites, and teaching them to avoid falling into the rabbit hole of excessive anxiety-provoking information. Therapist-guided Internet use helps individuals develop healthier online habits and reduces the likelihood of compulsive behavior.[19]

PREVENTION STRATEGIES

Digital health literacy

Promoting digital health literacy is crucial in preventing CCD. Educating individuals about the pitfalls of seeking health information online and providing critical evaluation skills can mitigate negative impacts. Emphasize using reliable sources, understanding research methodology, and fostering healthy skepticism toward online health information.

Encouraging healthy online behaviors

Individuals should seek guidance from health-care professionals for accurate diagnoses and medical advice instead of relying solely on online sources. Emphasize seeking a second opinion, avoiding self-diagnosis, and using reputable websites. Balancing online health searches with offline self-care activities promotes a more balanced approach to health.

Reducing stigma and open communication

Reducing the stigma associated with seeking mental health support facilitates early intervention for CCD. Create a safe and nonjudgmental environment where individuals feel comfortable discussing their health concerns. Encourage open communication about mental health and the challenges of navigating online health information.

Supportive online communities

Encourage the development of supportive online communities that promote evidence-based information, responsible sharing of personal experiences, and emotional support. These communities can help individuals navigate health concerns more healthily and provide validation and reassurance.

Balanced media reporting

Promote responsible reporting of medical information in media outlets to prevent CCD. Journalists and media professionals should prioritize accurate reporting, avoid sensationalism, and provide context and expert opinions when discussing health-related topics.

CONCLUSION

CCD is a growing mental health concern in India due to increased Internet accessibility and health information searches. Prompt action is necessary to prevent serious harm to the public. Developing epidemiological and therapeutic knowledge is crucial to managing CCD. Implementing preventive strategies at the community level is crucial to reduce the incidence of this problem and protect the well-being of those affected. In addition, clinical trials are required. Future investigations should focus on elucidating the conceptual nature of CCD, quantifying its effects, and devising evidence-backed strategies to enhance CCD management.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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