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Doctors Urged to Steer Patients Online Group: 'Prescribe' them to trustworthy MedlinePlus site

By **Karen Pallarito**
HealthDay Reporter

THURSDAY, April 22 (HealthDayNews) -- If you've ever left the doctor's office stunned or confused about the diagnosis you or a family member has been given and worried about the prognosis, help is on the way.



The American College of Physicians, the nation's largest medical specialty society, on Thursday announced a plan in which its 115,000 internists will be encouraged to direct patients to a National Institutes of Health site, called MedlinePlus, for more information.

"MedlinePlus is really the bridge that allows that patient after they leave the exam room to have that information about their disease," said Jean A. Krause, executive vice president and CEO of the American College of Physicians Foundation.

Participating internists will get special pads to write "prescriptions" directing patients to the Web site.

The project is called "Information Rx" and it's being rolled out nationally in partnership with the National Library of Medicine, the nation's largest medical library and operator of the site. The goal is to help patients get a better understanding of their health condition by sending them to a trustworthy source of information.

"It's something our physicians know they can trust and we feel comfortable recommending to our patients," Krause said.

The American College of Physicians announced the project during its annual meeting in New Orleans.

As part of the National Institutes of Health, the National Library of Medicine is a government agency that provides links to information from a multitude of government agencies. They include the National Institutes of Health, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Veterans Administration.

The site also provides links to information from other reliable sources, such as the American Cancer Society and the American Heart Association or a group specializing in a specific disorder.

It's also the place to search for a clinical trial or look up an unfamiliar medical term.

Designed specifically with consumers in mind, MedlinePlus has been around since 1998. Through word of mouth, its popularity has grown to more than 1 million users a day.

Dr. Donald A.B. Lindberg, the National Library of Medicine's director, expects patients to be very receptive.

"I think we've convinced ourselves there's just tremendous thirst for medical information, at least something that you can believe and not something you're getting snookered on," he said.

After pilot testing in Georgia and Iowa, the American College of Physicians reaffirmed the project to help patients without access to the Internet.

"Significantly, we learned that physicians were not always referring their patients to the Web site," Krause said. Many times doctors didn't think their patients had access to a computer, she explained. Or they didn't believe their patients had the cognitive skills to understand the information.

A revised pilot test in Virginia proved those doctors wrong. A partnership with local libraries gave patients broader access to computers and help with looking up information on MedlinePlus. Patient feedback has been very positive, Krause said.

"They're able to better understand what their condition is," Krause said. "They're better equipped to explain it to their families."

More information

Information at MedlinePlus is available in both **English** and **Spanish**.

SOURCES: Donald A.B. Lindberg, M.D., director, National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, Md.; Jean A. Krause, executive vice president and CEO, American College of Physicians Foundation, Philadelphia