The Internet and Eating Disorders

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KEY POINTS

• Because therapeutic expertise is not generally available and finances for medical care are constrained, use of the Internet in medical therapy will expand to meet those needs.
• Numerous sites are available for dissemination of educational material for patients, families, and health care professionals.
• Various organizations are attempting to develop and evaluate therapeutics on the Internet.

1. INTRODUCTION

The cost of medical care continues to be an issue for governmental organizations and companies. As a consequence, there are efforts to reduce costs. The “medicalization” of the eating disorders with the use of pharmaceuticals to displace costs of more intensive counseling is one trend toward reduction of health care expense. The development of Internet resources to substitute for personalized counseling is another.

Online resources can be beneficial additions for health care professionals and patients. For professionals, they can be a source of information and can be used as supplements for patients to augment the benefits provided during office visits. This can be of benefit in both the integrated eating-disorders clinic and the smaller practice that has a limited support system.

Patients should be informed of these resources and guided to avoid strictly commercial and fad sites. This chapter summarizes available online information sources, the patient perspective, and support groups. Table 1 outlines the chapter.

2. THE INTERNET AS A SOURCE OF INFORMATION

If one enters “eating disorders” into an Internet search engine, one will obtain approx 1.5 million hits. Thus, although there is a substantial amount of information available on the Internet, accessing this information via search engines is not efficient (1) and the priority of hits does not reflect a factual or noncommercial priority. Additionally, although much of the available medical information tends to be good, it is generally at an academic reading level that is beyond most patients (1).
As a consequence, several reputable sites that are noncommercial or that separate commercial content from information sharing are provided here. Many of these include a description of the information or services that they provide. This list is not exhaustive and it is acknowledged that organizations and Internet addresses may change. Some of the listed organizations provide handouts for patients and some may provide information that might assist a practitioner caring for patients with eating disorders or help in identifying referral services.

2.1. Disease Information: Eating Disorders

The Academy for Eating Disorders (AED) (www.aedweb.org) is a professional organization whose goal is to promote research in the eating disorders in an effort to improve the treatment, education, and prevention of eating disorders. The AED publishes the *International Journal of Eating Disorders*. Their address is 6728 Old McLean Village Drive, McLean, VA 22101; Phone: 703-556-9222; Fax: 703-556-8729; aed@degnon.org.

The American Academy of Family Physicians (www.familydoctor.org) provides handouts for patient use. The handout for anorexia nervosa is found at familydoctor.org/handouts/063.html. A handout designed for teens can be found at familydoctor.org/handouts/277.html.

The Anorexia File, Center for Current Research (www.lifestages.com/health/anorexia.html) provides information on recent research on treatments for anorexia nervosa.

The Center for Change, Incorporated (centerforchange.com) is a facility for treatment, but their website provides information about eating disorders including a list of and links to recent publications. Their address is 1790 North State Street, Orem, UT 84057; Phone: 801-224-8255; Toll Free: 888-224-8250; Fax: 801-224-8301.

The Center for the Study of Anorexia and Associated Disorders (www.health.gov/NHIC/NHICScripts/Entry.cfm?HRCode=HR2111) provides treatment for eating disorder patients and their families. The center offers specialized training for professionals who treat people with eating disorders and seeks to educate the community about the