

# Web Sites Make Health Searches Easier

*New Engines Focus on Content From Select Medical Sources, Not Just Broad Lists of Links*

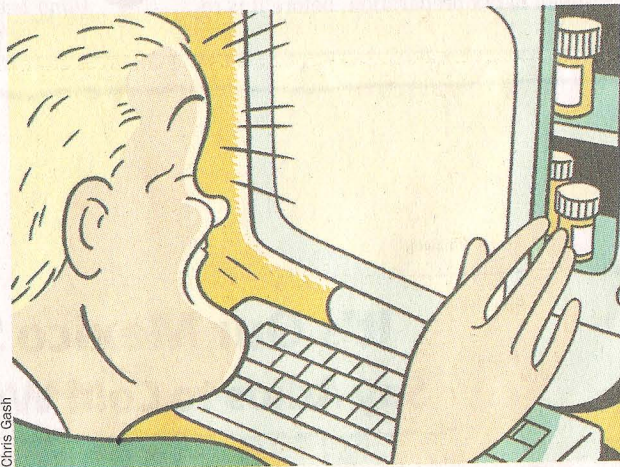
By JESSICA E. VASCELLARO

**S**EARCHING FOR MEDICAL information, one of the most popular—and vexing—uses of the Internet, is starting to get easier.

A range of Internet companies, from little-known start-ups to established players, are launching tailored search engines that aim to deliver patients and their families relevant health-related content online. The sites still miss on certain tasks, such as locating doctors, but they provide new tools that more efficiently sort through vast stores of information from the Web.

In recent years, the Internet has become a hotbed of health resources. Nonprofit groups, government agencies, pharmaceutical companies and portals like WebMD have vastly expanded the information available online. Seventy-nine percent of Internet users now use the Web to research topics like diseases, diets, drugs and doctors, according to a report issued last year by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, a Washington, D.C., nonprofit that studies the Internet.

And the surging interest in online health infor-



Chris Gash

mation has sparked a spate of deals and buyouts. America Online co-founder Steve Case plans a new online health venture to help consumers better manage their medical care, expected to be launched this year. His company, Revolution Health Group went on a shopping spree, purchasing several start-ups like MyDNA Media, a provider of health news and information, and Simo Software Inc., a maker of software to manage health spending and records. In January WebMD Health purchased eMedicine.com, an online resource for health-care professionals, for \$25.5 million. Last year the company also ac-

quired HealthShare Technology, which supplies tools for evaluating hospitals.

But with the wealth of information, combing through online medical resources is often daunting. Consumers unsatisfied with content from one destination must pick through a data dump of results from a general search engine.

Moreover, finding medical information online poses certain unique problems like knowing the correct spelling of complex conditions. It is also difficult to judge the credibility of the information—a common problem with Internet searches, but one that can have significant consequences for patients making medical decisions.

The new offerings aim to address some of these shortcomings, by limiting the number of pages they search and taking consumers directly to the relevant information, rather than merely listing links that must then be sorted through. Kosmix.com, launched last month by Cosmix Corp. of Mountain View, Calif., offers a tailored health-search engine that trolls more than three billion general Web pages and divides its results into some 20 relevant categories like diet and nutrition, symptoms and message boards. Healthline Networks Inc.'s Healthline.com, launched last October, searches its own doctor-writ-

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ten articles, online medical reference books, and more than 170,000 sites chosen for their health relevance.

This month, New York-based **WebMD Health Corp.** added a feature that allows its more than 13 million monthly users to search across the entire Web, not just the WebMD site. The site late last year added the ability to search within particular categories, like news and experts. **Mamma.com Inc.**, which began as a destination for searching across several different search sites, now offers Mamma Health, a site that scans 12 health-related resources, including the federal government's MedlinePlus site, the British NHS Direct Online site, and WebMD.

And **Medstory Inc.**, of Foster City, Calif., plans to release new consumer search technology focused on medical- and health-related queries within the next few months. The site will troll specialized medical journals, government sources and the broader Web. Medstory currently offers information services for medical and pharmaceutical professionals.

The sites emphasize an increasingly popular approach known as "vertical searches." Unlike the mammoth general search engines operated by companies like **Google Inc.** and **Yahoo Inc.** vertical searches pull specific data out of selected sites to highlight, and often such engines organize their results into categories relevant to their theme.

With U.S. online health ad spending projected to grow to \$662 million in 2010, up 63% from last year, according to Jupiter Research, health information is the next logical place for vertical searches to take hold, industry analysts say.

Google, too, is mulling health-related Internet services. Adam Bosworth, a high-profile engineer at the search company, was listed in a program for the PC Forum conference last week as "Architect, Google Health," and has business cards with the same title. The Mountain View, Calif., company hasn't announced any health-related services, and a spokeswoman declined to comment. But one person familiar with the matter said that Mr. Bosworth is examining what Google should do in the health area.

The new health-related vertical search engines each work a little differently, but generally aim to highlight information from reliable sources, while skipping content that might not be useful. With major search engines, the breadth of sources means that results from well-regarded sources such as the Center for Disease Control and the National Institutes of Health may be scattered among entries from local advocacy groups or

## Headache Help

Some sites offering health-related Internet searches, and how they compare with a broader search engine like Google in a search for "headache."

WEB SITE	RESULT	COMMENT
<b>Google.com</b>	Most of the top results were links to the homepages of organizations with "headache" in their name.	Consumers would have to troll through each site to find specific health information.
<b>Mammahealth.com</b>	The page displays a concise definition from an online health encyclopedia followed by a list of frequently asked questions like "What are the causes of headaches?"	Annotated graphics of foreheads and the brain from the federal government's MedlinePlus site appear on the side of the screen.
<b>Healthline.com</b>	The top results include definitions from various online resources. A flow chart on the top left of the screen allows users to click between categories like risk factors, diagnosis and treatment.	The site gives users suggestions for refining their search. For broadening it, it suggests "pain sensation." For narrowing it, it suggests "migraine headache."
<b>Kosmix.com</b>	First link in the health search is to fact sheet on headaches from an online encyclopedia. The second link leads to a headache resource page provided by Aetna and Harvard Medical School.	An alternative view allows you to view the top three results across categories like alternative medicine and women's health on one screen.
<b>WebMD.com</b>	Top links were to relevant pages from the WebMD Condition Center, WebMD Medical Reference, and the WebMD Medical News Archive.	Initial search includes WebMD results only. Users can then click to broaden their search to Google.

nonmedical news articles where the search term happens to appear.

Some of the new health search engines, like **Kosmix.com**, search the Web broadly, but organize results by categories to help users find top results quickly, says Venky Harinarayan, one of the founders of **Kosmix.com**, which is also testing new search engines for politics and travel. To find studies on cancer, for instance, you can just search for cancer and click on the "case study" tab in the results screen. Sites like **Healthline.com** search only pages that have been selected for their medical content. This includes doctor-reviewed sites from encyclopedias, sites operated by university medical centers, hospitals and clinics, advice from prominent patient-advocacy groups, government sources and articles from some free medical journals. The search excludes sites that sell drugs.

Users who type "diabetes" into **Mammahealth.com** can immediately read a definition of the disease from an online medical dictionary, along with summaries of causes, symptoms and treatments. (The site also displays graphics, links for researching each topic further and phone numbers for patient hot lines.)

The search engines are also touting the reliability of their results. **Healthline.com** puts a "trusted" mark on results from doctor-reviewed sites and those that have been accredited by online Web ethics committees like the Health on the Net Foundation. **WebMD** allows you confine your results to experts. **Healthline.com** has a database that cross-references common disease names with technical ones meaning a consumer searching for "breast cancer" will also see results for "malignant neoplasm of the breast."

Some of the search results are so-called sponsored links paid for by advertisers, which is how the sites make their money. But as with broader search engines, the links are identified—and there tends to be less advertising content in these sites' results.

There are still entire categories of medical queries for which the search engines aren't very useful. Most still aren't helpful for finding a doctor, in part, the companies say because most consumers search for doctors through their health-insurance providers anyway. And most of the sites lack features that allow users to localize their searches.

—Kevin J. Delaney  
contributed to this article.