



IMAGE: Nancy Kay, DVM



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**ASK DR. DOG**

**Everybody's Gone Surfin'  
 Internet Vet Research 101**

By Nancy Kay, DVM

Dear Dr. Dog: I sometimes use the Internet to do research on my dog's health, but I just don't know what websites to put my trust in. Is there reliable info out there and, if so, where can I find it?

I enjoy hearing about what my clients are learning online. I sometimes come away with valuable new information, and am often amused by the extraordinary things they tell me - who knew that hip dysplasia is caused by global warming!

Surf to your heart's content, but be forewarned, not all veterinarians feel as I do. Who can blame them - they've grown weary of spending valuable time discussing "whackadoodle" notions gleaned from cyberspace and reining their clients in from online wild goose chases.

How unfortunate this is. Nowadays, people reflexively reach for their keyboards to learn more about their pet's issues. It's only natural (and in their pet's best interest) that they discuss what they've learned with their veterinarians.

Your vet will be more inclined to discuss Internet research if you're careful to avoid online "junk food." How can you determine whether or not a website is dishing out worthy information? Here are some general guidelines:

1. Ask for your vet's specific website recommendations.
2. Veterinary college websites are likely to provide reliable information. Search for them by entering "veterinary college" or "veterinary school" after the name of the disease or symptom you are researching.
3. Web addresses ending in ".org," ".edu," and ".gov" represent nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, and governmental agencies, respectively. They are often sources of objective and accurate information.
4. If your dog has a breed-specific disease, pay a visit to the site of that specific breed's national organization.
5. Avoid business-sponsored websites that stand to make money when you believe and act on their claims.
6. Be ever so wary of anecdotal information. It's perfectly okay to marvel at remarkable tales (e.g. how Max the Rat Terrier's skin disease was miraculously cured by a single session of aromatherapy), but consider them fiction rather than fact. As fascinating as these National Enquirer type stories may seem, please don't let them significantly influence the choices you make for your dog.
7. I really love disease-specific online forums. Check out those sponsored by Yahoo ([groups.yahoo.com](http://groups.yahoo.com)). They provide a wealth of educational information, and other members can be a wonderful source of emotional support - always a good thing for those of us who share our homes and hearts with animals. If you decide to join an online forum, I encourage you to choose a group that focuses on a specific disease (kidney failure, diabetes, etc.), has been around for several years, and has a large membership. Also look for multiple moderators who screen potential participants, screen comments to keep things on topic, present more than one point of view, and are available day and night for advice and support. Look for cited references (clinical research that supports what is being recommended). Such groups should have a homepage that explains the focus of the group and provides the number of members and posts per month (the more the better). They may have public archives of previous posts so you can read up on your area of concern.

Are there effective ways to communicate with your vet about your online research that is neither irritating to her nor intimidating for you? I truly believe it is possible, but it involves some work and planning on your part. Listed below are some secrets for success:

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- Choose a vet who is happy and willing to participate in two-way, collaborative dialogue with you. Your opinions, feelings, and questions are held in high regard and enough time is allowed during the office visit to hear them. Remember, it's up to you to make the right choice in health practitioners!
- Let your vet know that you appreciate her willingness and patience in helping you understand how best to utilize what you've learned online.
- Wait for the appropriate time during the office visit to discuss what you've learned online. Allow your veterinarian to ask you questions about the matter at hand and examine your precious Poopsie rather than "tackling" her with a discussion of your Internet research the moment she sets foot in the exam room.
- Be brief and to the point with your questions. Remember, most office visits are scheduled for 15 to 20 minutes, max.
- Let your veterinarian know that you've learned how to be a discriminating surfer, that you know how to differentiate between valuable online resources and cyber-fluff.

The Internet is an extraordinary tool right at our fingertips. I encourage you to apply your critical thinking skills when choosing which websites to take seriously and which ones to visit merely for a good chuckle. Approach conversations with your vet about your Internet research thoughtfully and tactfully. These strategies are bound to create a win-win-win situation - for you, your veterinarian, and your beloved best buddy!

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*Dr. Nancy Kay is a board-certified specialist in small animal internal medicine at the VCA Animal Care Center in Rohnert Park and the author of Speaking for Spot: Be the Advocate Your Dog Needs to Live a Happy, Healthy, Longer Life (Trafalgar Square Books). She is the recipient of the American Animal Hospital Association 2009 Hill's Animal Welfare and Humane Ethics Award. Dr. Kay shares her life with two dogs, three cats, three goats, and two horses. You can contact her and view her blog via [www.speakingforspot.com](http://www.speakingforspot.com).*