



A woman scrolls through medical symptoms on her smartphone, reflecting the growing trend of self-diagnosis through online searches and social media health advice before seeking professional medical care. PHOTO/FILE

# The cost of trusting online health advice

As smartphones and social media become the first stop for health advice, more people are diagnosing and treating themselves before seeing medical professionals. However, experts warn that relying on internet remedies and self-medication can delay proper treatment and put lives at risk.

BY GEOFFREY OYET OKWERA

Rachael Adong woke up one morning to an uncomfortable itching sensation on her skin. When she checked the mirror, she noticed patches of rash spreading on her arms and neck. Concerned and unsure of the cause, she decided to turn to the internet before booking an appointment with a dermatologist.

Using her smartphone, Adong searched online for possible explanations for her sudden skin irritation. She typed descriptions of her symptoms into search engines and browsed various health websites and forums, hoping to find something that matched her experience. She even took selfies of the affected areas and compared them with images she found online.

Her search eventually led her to TikTok, where she watched several short videos of people sharing their experiences with skin rashes and allergic reactions. Some creators explained what had triggered their conditions, while others

documented their treatment journeys. Intrigued, Adong explored the comment sections, where viewers shared home remedies, over-the-counter drug suggestions, and personal testimonies. She found some of the advice convincing and reliable.

Feeling more informed and slightly reassured, Adong decided to visit a nearby pharmacy. Armed with the information she had gathered online, she prepared to buy medication that she hoped would ease her irritation, while also considering a professional medical consultation if the rash persisted.

## The internet as the first doctor

In today's digital era, many individuals have become increasingly tech-savvy, often turning to the internet for answers before making decisions. Whether for everyday purchases or significant life choices, a quick Google search has become a primary source of information for many. The medical field is no exception to this trend. Online health information and virtual consultations have rapidly expanded across nearly every area of healthcare, transforming how people seek advice, understand symptoms, and make decisions about treatment.

The Ministry of Health and the National Drug Authority have consistently raised concerns about the misuse of medication for common illnesses. Despite ongoing awareness campaigns and warnings, many people continue to engage in self-medication.

According to various studies and reports, self-medication poses a significant public health challenge in Uganda, with its prevalence estimated to be between 55.6 percent and 63.5 percent among the

population.

## Dangers of self-medication

Hanifah Nakigozi, a pharmacist in Wakiso, emphasises the importance of having basic knowledge about one's health condition. However, she cautions that self-diagnosis and treatment can be risky, especially if the diagnosis is incorrect. She explains that diagnosis is the essential first step in the treatment process; an incorrect diagnosis can lead to the wrong medication, potentially worsening the individual's health condition.

"Use the internet to understand basic first aid for certain conditions, but always seek the opinion of qualified medical doctors for specific issues. You can also discuss your symptoms with a qualified pharmacist, who can recommend appropriate medication," Nakigozi advises.

Nakigozi points out that many Ugandans avoid visiting clinics for diagnosis and treatment due to the associated costs. Expenses such as consultation fees, laboratory tests, and transportation, particularly for those travelling long distances, can be overwhelming. One patient confided to Nakigozi that the financial burden of seeking care at medical centres and hospitals is significant, even before actual treatment begins.

In contrast, Jackline Atuhaire, a businesswoman from Kampala, states that her concerns are not financial but rather about the long queues and delays in public health facilities, where patients often wait for extended periods before receiving attention. After identifying her ailment, she prefers private health facilities, which have shorter waiting times, even though they tend to be more expensive.

Experts suggest that self-medication can be helpful under the guidance of trained medical professionals, particularly in extreme situations when individuals are far from health facilities. However, they warn that relying heavily on advice from TikTok and other online sources can be dangerous, as it may worsen a health condition. This concern stems from the increasing trend of

unqualified individuals sharing medical advice online.

## Effects on mental health

Charity Namuswe, a psychiatric nurse at Bbale Health Centre IV in Kayunga, says self-diagnosis and self-medication can affect mental health both positively and negatively, depending on the accuracy of the information and whether professional support is involved.

Namuswe commends guided self-diagnosis, noting that it can help people recognise mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression. However, she emphasises that after this initial awareness, individuals should seek professional help promptly to establish the actual cause and receive accurate treatment before the condition worsens.

"Mental health awareness is increasingly cultivated online through access to information in books and videos, which improves understanding and helps reduce stigma. However, after obtaining this information, one should approach professionals for proper assessment and care," explains Namuswe.

She adds that inaccurate self-diagnosis can lead to misdiagnosis, which may have serious consequences because it results in inappropriate treatment. Namuswe cites an example where a person may assume they are suffering from depression when, in fact, the condition could be bipolar disorder.

She also observes that reliance on self-diagnosis often delays qualified care, allowing symptoms to worsen over time. In some cases, this may eventually lead to substance misuse as individuals begin taking medications that were never professionally prescribed for their condition.

The condition may appear to improve temporarily when a person engages in self-medication, but in many cases, it eventually worsens, especially when no clinical assessment is sought. This is why experts continue to emphasise the importance of seeking medical advice after gathering basic health information online.

## When online advice goes wrong

Back to Adong's case, her attempt to manage the skin condition became more complicated after she followed advice from TikTok videos that only aggravated the rashes on her body. What began as a simple effort to find quick relief online gradually turned into a worsening condition, as the remedies she tried proved ineffective and, in some cases, harmful.

Realising the situation was not improving, she eventually sought expert treatment from a dermatologist, who carefully examined her skin, provided an accurate diagnosis, and recommended the appropriate treatment. Although she had delayed seeking medical care, Adong's condition later improved significantly after making the right decision to pursue proper treatment.

Her experience underscores the importance of consulting qualified health professionals rather than relying solely on online advice.

Atuhaire, who sought help from professional medics from the onset, shares a story of full recovery after receiving timely diagnosis and treatment. Although the private health facility was costly, she says the care was worth it because she healed.

Their experiences highlight a growing reality in the digital age: while the internet can offer information and reassurance, it cannot replace the trained judgment of qualified medical professionals.

## RED FLAGS: WHEN YOU SHOULD STOP GOOGLING AND SEE A DOCTOR

Warning signs that require professional attention.

- Difficulty breathing.
- Chest pain.
- Persistent high fever.
- Sudden severe headaches.
- Rashes spreading rapidly.
- Suicidal thoughts or severe anxiety.
- Symptoms lasting longer than expected.
- Reactions after taking medication.