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HEALTH JOURNAL By TARA PARKER-POPE



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Web Site Tallies Your Risk Of Disease And Tells You What You Can Do About It

October 31, 2006; Page D1

Everybody worries about cancer, heart disease and other illnesses, but most people don't have any idea what their long-term risk for developing a serious health problem really is.

The best place to find out is a Web site called www.yourdiseaserisk.com. The site, created by the Harvard Center for Cancer Prevention, stands out as one of the best health-oriented sites on the Web. Most Internet sites give users general health information, but the Harvard site has found a way to provide customized information to help patients better understand their personal health and risk for disease. More important, it also spits out a tailored action plan on ways to lower risk for health problems. It does all this using colorful graphics and charts that allow users to grasp how their health stacks up against the rest of the population and how small changes in lifestyle can lower their health risks.

HEALTH MAILBOX



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"We started this because people didn't appear to understand how much of cancer or other diseases can be prevented with changes in lifestyle,"

says Harvard professor Graham Colditz, director of the cancer prevention center and founder of the site. "We're giving you an individualized assessment of what you can do."

Other Web sites offer calculators to help users assess their risk for various health problems. The American Heart Association, for instance, offers a short quiz to help determine your 10-year risk of heart attack. But the calculator isn't easy to find. Go to www.americanheart.org and type "heart attack risk assessment" in the search box. But unlike the Harvard Web site, the heart association calculator just focuses on basic statistics like cholesterol and blood pressure, and doesn't factor in healthful behaviors like exercise, fruit and vegetable intake, and regular wine consumption.

Another site, www.cancer.gov/bcrisktool from the National Cancer Institute, allows women to calculate their risk for breast cancer. I like this site because it gives a woman her actual risk rather than using scary-sounding relative-risk percentages. For instance, a 60-year-old woman who had children after the age of 30 and whose own mother had breast cancer has a 44% higher

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risk of getting breast cancer than the average 60-year-old. But this site puts those numbers in perspective, showing her real risk of getting breast cancer in five years is just 2.6%, compared with the 1.8% risk faced by the average 60-year-old woman. But again, the downside of the NCI calculator is that it uses only a few basic questions and doesn't include the variety of factors that influence breast-cancer risk.



A Harvard site can help assess risk of diseases.

The Harvard Web site allows users to calculate their risk for developing 12 different cancers, as well as heart disease, stroke, diabetes and osteoporosis. The site goes beyond the standard questions about age, cholesterol and family history and explores the variety of lifestyle choices, environmental issues and other factors that can influence health risk. The questions are based on risk factors that have been established through credible scientific studies. To create the site, researchers pored through the medical literature, looking for various risk factors that could influence a particular disease, such as age of first period (breast cancer), age of first sexual contact (cervical cancer) and history of steroid use (osteoporosis). Then a committee of Harvard experts met to discuss the quality of the research behind those risk factors and formed a consensus on which risk factors should be used in the Web-site survey to calculate a person's overall risk for various diseases.

"There's no way to completely control everything," says Cynthia Stein, associate director of the Harvard center, who in 2004 helped revamp the site from just a cancer tool to a risk assessment for several diseases. "You can't change your family history or your age. Those do have a huge impact on your risk, but there are things you can do to keep yourself healthier."

At the end of the survey, the site creates a color-coded graphic showing how your risk stacks up against the rest of the population. But the best thing about yourdiseaserisk.com is the next step -- a customized action plan showing how you can alter your risk through lifestyle changes, such as increasing vegetable consumption, exercising more, taking calcium supplements or a multivitamin, stopping smoking or changing alcohol habits. The site allows you to click on those tips, and the color-coded graph changes, showing the user how adopting the lifestyle changes will alter risk.

The site, which receives about 2,000 visits a day, is supported by Harvard, various foundations and research grants. The site is constantly being updated as new health information becomes available.

• Email me at healthjournal@wsj.com; read my responses in [Health Mailbox](#) inside this section.

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ABOUT HEALTH JOURNAL

Since 2000, Tara Parker-Pope has been writing Health Journal, a column devoted to exploring health issues that directly affect our readers' daily lives. Before that, she spent five years as a consumer-products reporter, first for The Wall Street Journal Europe in London and most recently from the Journal's New York headquarters. She is a 1988 graduate of the University of Texas, where she majored in sociology.

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