



Health Anxiety and Symptom Googling: Breaking the Checking Cycle

An explainer, checking tracker, and "delay the search" plan · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)

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At a glance

- Health anxiety is persistent worry about having or developing a serious illness, despite reassurance.
- Googling, body-checking, and seeking reassurance bring brief relief, then more worry.
- Gradually reducing checking is one of the most effective ways to reduce health anxiety.

The checking cycle

It is normal to notice your body and to seek care when something is wrong. Health anxiety starts when worry becomes constant and reassurance never lasts. A twinge leads to a search, the search turns up frightening possibilities, and anxiety rises. You check again, ask someone again, or book another appointment. Relief is short-lived, and the cycle repeats.

1. Notice a sensation (a headache, a lump, a skipped heartbeat)
2. Interpret it as a sign of serious illness
3. Feel anxious
4. Check: Google, examine, ask for reassurance
5. Brief relief, followed by doubt ("But what if they missed something?")
6. Increased focus on the body, so you notice even more sensations

Why reassurance doesn't last

Reassurance answers the question for a moment, but it also teaches your brain that the worry was important enough to need an answer. Over time, you need more and more reassurance to feel the same relief. Learning to tolerate uncertainty is the key.

Also, attention changes sensation. The more you focus on a body part, the more you notice normal feelings that you would usually ignore.

What the research says

The cognitive model of health anxiety describes how misinterpreting normal body sensations and repeated checking maintain the problem (Salkovskis & Warwick, 1986).

A large randomized trial found that CBT for health anxiety, delivered in medical clinics, led to significant and lasting improvements (Tyrer et al., 2014).

Tool: My Checking Tracker and Delay Plan

Track each urge to check, search, or seek reassurance. Just noticing patterns is a powerful first step.

Day	Sensation or worry	Urge (0–10)	Did I check? How?	Anxiety after 1 hour (0–10)
Mon				
Tue				
Wed				
Thu				
Fri				
Sat				
Sun				

My "Delay the Search" plan

1. Notice the urge: "I want to Google this."
2. Delay: wait 30 minutes (then gradually longer).
3. Do something absorbing during the delay.
4. Re-rate the urge. It often fades on its own.
5. If I have a genuine new medical concern, I will book an appointment with my doctor instead of searching.

Strategies to try

- **Stick to one trusted source.** Agree with your doctor on a plan for check-ups rather than searching symptoms.
- **Reduce body-checking gradually.** If you check a spot several times a day, try cutting back by one check at a time.
- **Notice "what if" thinking.** Label it: "This is a what-if thought, not a fact."

- **Ask loved ones to help kindly.** Instead of reassuring you again, they can say, "I know this is hard. What can you do with the worry right now?"

Strategies you may not have heard of

These less common, evidence-informed techniques go beyond the usual advice. Try one at a time and notice what works for you.

- **Test Theory A vs. Theory B.** Theory A: "I have a serious illness." Theory B: "I have a worry problem about illness." Write the evidence for each. This technique helps people step back from certainty.
- **Run an attention experiment.** Focus intensely on your left elbow for two minutes. Notice tingling, warmth, or pressure? Attention alone creates sensations, which helps explain what happens with health worries.
- **Set a reassurance budget.** Allow one reassurance request a day, then reduce it gradually. Notice that anxiety eases over time without it.
- **Keep a "doctor questions" list.** Instead of searching, write the question down for your next appointment.

Journal prompts

Take your time with these. Write freely; there are no right answers.

What health worries come up most often for me?

What do I fear would happen if I didn't check?

How much time does checking take from my week?

What would I do with that time and energy instead?

When to reach out for support

If health worries take up a lot of your time, cause significant distress, or reassurance from doctors doesn't help, CBT for health anxiety can make a real difference. Always see a doctor for new or concerning symptoms.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

Salkovskis, P. M., & Warwick, H. M. C. (1986). Morbid preoccupations, health anxiety and reassurance: A cognitive-behavioural approach to hypochondriasis. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 24(5), 597–602.

Tyrer, P., et al. (2014). Clinical and cost-effectiveness of cognitive behaviour therapy for health anxiety in medical patients: A multicentre randomised controlled trial. *The Lancet*, 383(9913), 219–225.

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