Imagine that you have had excellent health all of your life and you are suddenly diagnosed with cancer. At first you will likely be in a state of shock unable to fully understand how life might change or even end. Gradually you and those around you may start to plan and strategize how to deal with this new reality. Doctors give you information and advise on how to proceed. They answer lots of questions, but sometimes you need more information before you can determine what you really need to know. That’s when many of us would turn to the Internet, taking care not to believe everything we read and being careful to warn others to do the same.

The questions that we all need to ask in such situations are which sites should I trust? And what is relevant to me, not just my medical situation, but also my life style? Suddenly, faced with a barrage of strange sounding medical terms, and choices about which drugs or medical procedures to select, we feel scared and alone. In some countries fears about whether costly treatment will be covered by medical insurance add to the trauma. But there is hope. New drugs and procedures are being discovered everyday. But this is not enough; society is waking up to the benefits of e-health and online health support groups.

Like local, face-to-face support communities, their online equivalents enable people, often scattered across the country or even the world, to exchange information and offer support to each other. Such communities are particularly valuable for those who struggle with mobility or have a rare condition that is shared by only a few people. Furthermore, online health communities can be accessed at any time, day or night, which many people find comforting. Perhaps most important of all, they bring together people with similar problems who have a deep understanding of what it is like to have a particular disease.

Other medical problems result when a disease is chronic and requires the patient to stick to a particular routine, for example, a child with an obesity problem or a person with diabetes. In these situations support to manage the health problem on a daily basis is needed and technology can often help here too.

_E-Health Communities and Online Self-Help Groups: Applications and Usage_ edited by Dr. Åsa Smedberg, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Computer and Systems Sciences at Stockholm University in Sweden provides a diverse selection of chapters written by experts that address many of the important health issues of our age. There are chapters about virtual worlds for children, self-help systems for youths, including those with obesity, and older adults. It has a chapter on the increasingly important topic of health literacy and one on mobile apps for health support, as well as chapters on patient support communities for cancer and other diseases, and many more.

Technology is changing our health systems and empowering patients to understand their own health much better than ever before. Dr. Åsa Smedberg has compiled an impressive “must read” book for anyone...
interested in E-Health communities and online self-help groups. Each chapter is a valuable resource for patients, practitioners, and researchers interested in how technology can support health care. This book is full of good examples for those wanting to read in depth while also providing an excellent overview of the field.

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Jennifer Preece is Professor and Dean of the College of Information Studies – Maryland’s iSchool - at the University of Maryland. Jenny’s teaching and research focuses on the intersection between information, community and technology. She is particularly interested in community participation on- and off-line and social computing. She has researched ways to support empathy online, patterns of online participation and what makes technology-supported communities successful. Jenny is author of over two hundred articles that include refereed journal and conference proceedings and eight books. Her two most recent books are: “Online Communities: Designing Usability, Supporting Sociability” (2000) and a co-authored text entitled “Interaction Design: Beyond Human-Computer Interaction” (1st Ed. 2002; 2nd Ed. 2007). Both books are published by John Wiley & Sons. She is also a regular conference keynote speaker.