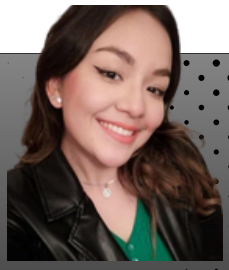
Use of ChatGPT by the Population for Self-Medication: Beneficial or Harmful?



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Artificial intelligence (AI) has entered our lives to revolutionize the world as we know it, streamlining processes and replacing jobs previously performed by humans. While for many it may represent a benefit and a tool to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of many activities, in the field of medicine, this is not entirely true. It must be acknowledged that AI has contributed many benefits to healthcare, from enabling early breast cancer detection by identifying lesions that would be invisible on mammograms, to predicting dementia, among many other advancements. While the immense utility of this tool cannot be denied, there is one issue in which it is not beneficial but rather detrimental— a truly concerning situation that has not been addressed: self-medication.

ChatGPT is an AI tool that provides immediate responses to any question posed. It is remarkably easy to access, and for patients who prefer not to pay for consultations because they consider their symptoms not “serious enough” to visit a doctor, or simply due to laziness, it often serves as a convenient way to obtain answers to “treat their symptoms.” Let’s be honest, in today's world, we like things to be easy and fast, and what better than consulting a tool that has gained a reputation for being highly effective? The problem arises when people do not take into account all the complexities behind a diagnosis, and worse yet, behind a treatment.

In in-person consultations, it is widely recognized that patients often believe they know more than the doctors, as seen when patients demand antibiotics for a simple cold. This makes it easy to believe that in the future, as this AI tool becomes more widespread, it will become more common for patients to specifically ask for what they want, just so they can be handed the prescription after discussing it with ChatGPT.

The problem with using ChatGPT for self-medication lies in two key issues: seeking a diagnosis and treatment from AI, and self-medication itself. First, a diagnosis must take into account various variables such as signs and symptoms, gathered through a directed interview aimed at forming a hypothesis; comorbidities or other data that can only be identified during a physical examination by a qualified doctor— details that patients do not provide when formulating questions to ChatGPT.

The good news is that when you ask for a diagnosis, the AI does not give you a definitive one. Instead, based on the symptoms, it provides a list of possible conditions. On the other hand, if the patient asks for a treatment, AI may suggest solutions without considering the prior mentioned variables, which could result in the patient worsening their condition. Dosage, side effects, and drug interactions are critical factors that need to be evaluated to ensure that the patient avoids preventable complications when seeing a doctor. This complicates the work for physicians treating the patient later, as the incorrect treatment may require more invasive or risky procedures, and if things go wrong, patients may blame the doctor for "negligence" for not being able to resolve the consequences of their own decisions.

While AI is a useful and beneficial tool that enables extraordinary achievements, with this power comes great responsibility, and we must not abuse it. Although its ease of use and speed in providing responses make it an attractive option for many, what guarantees that in the not-so-distant future, it won't harm us more than it helps? We cannot know that, but we can predict it. Many people, to avoid consulting a doctor, prefer to turn to these tools. However, health is a delicate matter that requires human reasoning, something no machine can fully replace. As creators of these technologies, we must be aware that excessive reliance on AI could lead us into problematic situations, especially if the day ever comes when machines replace even doctors. Therefore, we must use AI responsibly, as a resource to complement our knowledge, not as a substitute for the years of study and experience of medical professionals, who are the true experts in the field.