

# **Your medical searches on the internet, and your privacy (or lack thereof)**

It's no secret that the National Security Agency is capable of tracking your movements from your cell phone signal. Facebook is registering everything you click on, using advertising as an excuse to insert itself even further into our lives. Online advertisers collect and catalog "cookies" left behind on sites you search and browse. With more and more of your online behavior followed, every area of your daily life that you expose may be monitored by government agencies or corporations for their own purposes. Your health and your interest in specific medical information is certainly one of those areas. Studies have found that sites like WebMD, CDC.gov, Mayo Clinic, and Livestrong all contain tracking software that sends any pages you look at to businesses like Facebook, Twitter, and data brokers like Experian and Axciom.

## **Medical Searches and Where the Data Goes**

It's easier now than it has ever been to look up medical information, from specific diseases to symptoms and treatments. But like with all convenience, it comes at a price. Over 90% of the top 50 search results of nearly 2,000 common diseases made third-party requests to other websites like Google, Facebook, and AppNexus among others. For-profit health sites were among the worst offenders. WebMD, one of the most popular online websites for health related concerns, sent third-party requests detailing individuals searches to 34 separate domains, including data brokers Axciom and Experian. Experian is especially troubling, as they have been involved in selling consumer data to services perpetuating identity

theft.

WedMD is first and foremost a business, and it's not difficult to believe they would sell search data in the name of profit. Perhaps more surprising is the role of healthcare.gov in this race to make a quick buck from violating consumers' medical privacy. As millions signed up for health care, the data they gave the website was transmitted to at least 14 third-party domains. Personal information was sent to these sites even if the person using healthcare.gov had specifically enabled Do Not Track. Other government health websites, notably CDC.gov, are also loaded down with tracking software. What does it say about a government that spies on its own citizens and then turns that data over to companies who are willing to further exploit them?

## **The Long Reach of Google**

Does this mean all health websites have only their own interests at heart? Probably not. More likely than not, they have Google. In the study that analyzed third-party requests from health websites, 78% of pages on those web sites included content from Google. Today's standard website almost always includes some type of analytics, video material, and social media. This would also account for the second and third most present third party contents, Facebook and comScore, another analytics company.

Last year in Canada, Google was taken to task for violating the government's privacy laws after a citizen discovered he was being targeted with ads for a sleep condition he was searching. The Office of Canada's Privacy Commissioner was able to recreate the plaintiff's experience, showing what Google is capable of divining about your personal medical information through its online properties.

# Is Privacy Possible?

Unfortunately, software tracking of any and all activities involving technology are already firmly entrenched in our way of life. For the average user of the Internet, it's next to impossible to avoid. Even so, you can still take measures to protect yourself. If you're looking for sensitive health information or want a little more privacy, consider using an app like Privacy Badger or Adblock to increase your chance of blocking third-party requests. Clearing your browser history often also gives corporations less information to easily dig through. Since there are so many companies involved in selling your information online, it's up to you to protect yourself.

## Sources:

- *Looking Up Symptoms Online? These Companies Are Tracking You* – Motherboard
- *HealthCare.gov Sends Personal Data to Dozens of Tracking Websites* – Electronic Frontier Foundation
- *Experian Sold Consumer Data to ID Theft Service* – Krebs On Security
- *The future of Facebook: Tracking users' offline buying habits, total lack of privacy* – Natural News