



Sites fall into one of two types, says Cugelman: low-tech resources that provide information; and high-tech sites that include interactive features such as an initial assessment, a step-by-step program, the ability to record personal data and track your progress, feedback on your behaviour, and forums to interact with other users. “Low-tech sites are the equivalent of an online flyer or self-help book,” he says. The high-tech sites act like a motivational coach, which Cugelman found to be more effective.

Husli-Kelln credits the community forums on QuitNet.com as a major reason for her success—they offered instant access to ex-smokers and other quitters who would encourage her with pep talks any time her resolve started to feel shaky.

But web 2.0 bells and whistles aren’t the only feature you should seek out. After all, anyone can throw up a site and brag about its benefits. Ideally, you should see proof of credibility—look for a list of published scientific studies, for instance. Avoid resources that can offer only anecdotes from other users, cautions Dr. Garey Mazowita, a family physician in Vancouver who has worked on mental health projects for The College of Family Physicians of Canada. It’s also smart to pick a site associated with a legitimate, trustworthy organization.

Finally, be wary of sites that push product as the route to success. “Users can get sucked into buying unproven services or products,” cautions Trevor van Mierlo, CEO of Evolution Health Systems, a Toronto company that creates online health tools based on scientific research. (Smoke-Free Ontario, the Canadian Cancer Society and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health use the company’s licensed tools.)

No matter what site you use, the biggest factor deciding whether or not it will work is how dedicated you are to it. A study by the U.S.-based Kaiser Permanente Center for

Health Research showed that the more often the participants used an interactive weight-loss website, the longer they kept the pounds off. One way to solidify your commitment is to publicly declare it: Cugelman’s research found that programs involving social pressure—be it

enlisting a friend in your plan, or announcing your milestones via Twitter—were more likely to work.

While you don’t necessarily need your doctor’s OK before signing up online, Dr. Mazowita warns you should be aware of the dangers of trying to self-treat. Potential pitfalls can range from misdiagnosing yourself, missing critical information or not getting the right treatment to outright making a problem worse. The risks are greater for potentially chronic issues such as depression or anxiety.

That’s why the threshold for logging off and seeing a health care pro in real life should be low. “Reach out for help as soon as something does not feel right or a program stops working,” advises Dr. Mazowita. “Even just start by calling your provincial nurse hotline.” (Dial Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000, or call 811 in Quebec or British Columbia.) “You can bounce something off a neutral professional, and they could tell you it’s time to see a doctor.” —Leigh Doyle

# DR. GOOGLE

*Shed pounds, quit smoking, beat stress—no matter what your goal, you can LOG ON to change your life*

**WHEN LIA HUSLI-KELLN CRACKED A RIB DURING** a coughing fit last fall, she knew it was time to kick her half-pack-a-day smoking habit. “I was embarrassed. I’m a young person—that shouldn’t happen,” says the 35-year-old telecommunications professional in Regina, Sask. But by day two of her cold turkey approach, the cravings were almost too overwhelming to ignore. “I tried nicotine gum and it was disgusting, so I looked online for resources.” She found QuitNet.com, and she’s been smoke-free ever since.

Whether you want to break an addiction, ease anxiety or lose weight and get fit, one click of the mouse will turn up hundreds of sites promising results, sometimes at little to zero cost. But do they really help? Brian Cugelman, an online strategy and research consultant in Toronto, who published his Ph.D. research on web-based health programs in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, says they do—but not all are created equal.