

PREFACE

People are now taking increasing responsibility for their own health care. Many come to their doctor's office with printouts from the Internet of the latest scientific studies. People now evaluate options—such as whether to have surgery, radiation therapy, or drug therapy for cancer—to a depth and extent that was unheard of in their parents' generation. Then, people did what their doctor recommended, asked few questions, and sought little outside information about their medical problems.

Although that earlier era may have been a more trusting time, one of the main reasons people gathered little information on their own was that there was little understandable material readily available. Back then, some people turned to *The Merck Manual* for help. Even though it was a book for health care professionals, its straightforward style and minimal use of dense medical jargon helped make it understandable and useful to some of the general public.

To make *The Merck Manual's* content even more helpful to the public, in 1997 we “translated” it into everyday language, creating *The Merck Manual of Medical Information, Home Edition*. The current book, *The Merck Manual Home Health Handbook*, represents the 3rd edition of that first home version.

However, we were not the only ones to respond to the public's need. By the end of the 1990s, bookstores had entire sections devoted to health care with hundreds of titles. And then came the Internet, with thousands of web sites by doctors, patients, caregivers, hospitals, professional societies, patient advocacy groups, and seemingly almost everyone with an opinion, idea, or product related to health care.

Now, everyone everywhere has access to a depth and breadth of medical information that most doctors would have been hard pressed to find a generation ago. The current problem seems to be too much information rather than too little. Where do we go? Where do we start? The answer, of course, varies from person to person. Different people need different types and amounts of information. If people have had a disorder for a long time, they usually want very specialized information about it—they already know the basics. On the other hand, people who have just learned that they have a disorder usually first want general information.

In this wide range of information needs, *The Merck Manual Home Health Handbook* is designed to be the starting point on the road to understanding. For many people, it will be all the information they need. For others, it will be the foundation that helps them understand more complex information from other books and web sites. For all, it will improve communication with health care practitioners by providing full explanations of medical problems in clear, plain language, thus taking the mystery out of medical terms and jargon and also by raising awareness of questions and issues in medicine that people can then discuss in depth with their doctor. Our hope is that this book enlightens and empowers people and contributes to a healthier future.

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