

## **Getting the Picture: Online, Interactive Tutorials**

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Readers may recall that, ten years or so ago, news reports heralded the future use of computers as a tool for explaining medical procedures to patients. They described the development of programs that would allow doctors to actually show the details of, for instance, particular surgeries that patients were facing – details that would enable patients to visualize the anatomy and procedural steps of that surgery.

Happily, that time has come. Founded in 1995, The Patient Education Institute, a privately-held company, has developed a series of interactive software programs called X-plain. These programs – which combine graphics, text, animation, narration, interactive questions and feedback – have been available to patients through CD-ROMs, public kiosks, and clinical stations. More recently, they have been made available to anyone with Internet access and may be found at <http://www.medlineplus.gov/>, the patient-oriented website of the National Library of Medicine. At this writing, over 150 tutorials are available to patients. These free tutorials cover diseases and conditions, tests and diagnostic procedures, surgery and treatments, along with prevention and wellness measures. For more information about these programs and the Patient Education Institute, go to <http://www.x-plain.com/>.

### **What to Expect When Accessing the Tutorials**

Readers who decide to try these tutorials will find that they are designed so that they can be easily understood. Online instructions for going through the program are also easy to understand. To access the programs, go to [www.medlineplus.gov](http://www.medlineplus.gov) and click where it says online tutorial. Then, click on “go to module.” This will start the program. Before continuing, however, the program will check to see if software called Flash – required for the running of the tutorials – is installed on your machine. If not, it will give you the opportunity to download a free version of Flash. If you choose not to download it, you will not be able to use the tutorial. If you want to go ahead and download it, then, click “yes”. (In making this decision, you might want to keep in mind reports that free downloaded software often contains programs that enable its creators to see what sites you visit when on the web and to use that information for marketing purposes.)

When you have the software, or have downloaded it, the program can begin. While it has a particular sequence, it also has a menu listing which enables you to go to any of its sections at any time and as many times as you wish. For instance, the menu (and sequence) for the Pap Smear tutorial, is: introduction, anatomy, diseases of the cervix, during a pap smear, results, prevention, and summary. At the end of many sections, after the information is presented, you will be asked to answer yes/no or true/false questions

by clicking on the appropriate buttons. You'll then be told if your answer is correct or incorrect, with a brief explanation.

If you do not have your own computer with which to access these programs, you might try your library's computer. Because the tutorials require installation of the Flash software, however, you should first check with them to see if their computers have it and, if not, if they are willing to download it.□

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