

The online neurologist

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The rapid growth of neurological knowledge is both tremendously exciting and thoroughly challenging. Neurologists can now exploit a powerful array of online information using new web tools that can bring large amounts of data to a single page. Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds with mashups, as well as email alerts and podcasting, are diverse examples of the cornucopia of technological offerings exploding onto the scene.

Online sources for the latest neurological information include major media outlets, the web sites of academic societies and select proprietary sites, neurology news magazines such as *Neurology Today* and *Clinical Neurology News*, and peer-reviewed journals. Various online tools are available to facilitate the surveying of these information sources.

RSS feeds provide the recipient with a periodically updated selective list of items such as late-breaking news or recently published articles, along with links to full text. A list of neurology RSS feeds is available at http://www.rss4medics.com/rss_directory/neurology_feeds.html. RSS feeds can be displayed on most web browsers, and dedicated readers or aggregators (e.g. Google Reader) are also available to allow more-efficient viewing. As an exercise, use Internet Explorer 7 to open the home page of *Nature Clinical Practice Neurology* (<http://www.nature.com/ncpneuro/index.html>) and click on the symbol beside 'web feeds' in the right-hand column. Choose one of the two RSS feeds presented on the next page, then click on 'Subscribe to this feed'. Selecting the yellow star in the upper left hand area of the browser will display a link to the RSS feed, and the contents of upcoming issues of *Nature Clinical Practice Neurology* will now be readily viewable on the web browser.

Single RSS feeds can be inconvenient because the user must navigate between individual pages. A particularly attractive solution is a mashup, such as *iGoogle* or *Netvibes*, which simultaneously displays multiple RSS feeds

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in small boxes called modules or gadgets. Mashups can create a module based on any RSS feed, and they can also display portions of favorite web pages. Mashups are powerful tools for organizing the constantly updated web-based information that neurologists use on a daily basis.

Real-time email alerts are largely the domain of media outlets that monitor breaking health-related news. News sources such as CNN.com, Reuters and major newspapers can all send emails about health-related news to registered individuals. A few media sites that send email alerts—CNN.com, for example—allow customization of health-related news using keywords (e.g. neurology, stroke). Other sites including those of *The Times*, *The New York Times* and Reuters send email alerts from a category called 'Health', but these are not prefiltered to match neurologists' interests. It is now common practice for many journals to send email 'alerts' containing the table of contents for each new issue.

Podcasts are media files that are downloaded from the Internet for playback on personal computers or portable media players. These files typically offer 20–30-minute audio recordings of an oral review of a neurological topic or newly published paper. The paper's author or another expert is often interviewed. Podcasts are informative and can be played by the listener at convenient times, for example while commuting. A list of over 50 podcast sites for neurologists can be found by searching the iTunes Store with the term 'neurology'.

A great deal of attention is being focused on managing the proliferation of information made available by the Internet. New developments, including social networks, sophisticated search engines and wikis, are likely to alter the landscape even further. These efforts and emerging new applications will make it possible for neurologists to excel in a digital age.