

## Search Results

### *What is hypochondria?*

**Hypochondria** is a word similar to **hypochondriac**, which is the word your dad assigned to your mom's dad when you were eight. You remember him saying it in the car, which he was attempting to inch into the garage, careful to dodge the deflated soccer balls and dust-filmed fertilizers that flanked either side. You do not remember where you'd been previously, or what had preceded the conversation, which is a shame; though you could come up with some theories, if you tried. Like, maybe you and your family had just returned from visiting your grandparents, eighty miles northeast. Maybe, before you'd left, your grandfather had mentioned a belly pain he'd been having. It's probably nothing, he'd said, hiking up loose Woodstockian jeans. Probably not gastritis, or Celiac, or a cyst. Probably not my appendix.

In this scenario, your mom would have urged him to call the doctor, have it looked at right away. C'mon, Aba, as soon as we leave. Your grandfather would have quickly assented. And your grandmother—what would she have done? Would she have agreed with your mom, picked up the phone herself? Or would she have waved it off with the most exasperated Hebrew she could muster: *Ma pitom, Ari?* What for?

It's important, in such cases, the way a loved one responds.

And surely you did not discuss the incident the entire ride home. You and your brother were blessed with privilege and youth, an elixir that, when imbibed, causes one to forget

everything the moment it happens, including this. Your dad was laser-focused on the late-day traffic, and your mom was busy telling him to get away from the truck, slow down, watchthemerge, watchitandywatchit, to which he said I'm good, Ari, I know how to drive, *I got it*. Maybe she brought it up only when she felt that she no longer needed to worry about the family's safety. Maybe arriving home, the ritual act of pulling into the garage, into cluttered comfort—maybe it freed up space for that other worry, her dad's health. And maybe that's why your dad called him a **hypochondriac**. Because he believed it, sure, but more because he hoped the mere diagnosis, the clear naming of the thing, would remedy her fear.

Your dad twisted the key from the ignition. Your brother closed his Gameboy and yawned. You thought about *Akeelah and the Bee*, how any good speller knows that a big word is just a bunch of little words, compounded to mean something other, something more. And so, feeling for your belt buckle, you did your best to make it make sense.

**Hypo** sounds like hyper, you began.

**-chondriac**, like anaconda.

hyper  
+ anaconda  
energetic snake

*What are the causes?*

The summer you were ten, you were standing with your shirt off in a fitting room at Gap Kids. Your mom was there with you. You always wanted her there. You needed her opinion, her approval, someone to gather and fold the items you left bunched on the floor.

“Is that a lump?” she asked you, her pupils snapping back and forth.

You looked in the mirror, down, and back ahead. It was true: Your right nipple was red and protruding, while the left remained pink and flat. You shrugged and tried on another top. Blue. It suited you.

Then, that evening, you sat on the stairs, listening.

“She needs to be seen,” your mom insisted through sobs. “I’m scared, Andy. I mean, I just can’t help but think about—”

“That’s ridiculous, Ar. She’s a kid. My mom was forty-five, forty-six, when—”

“Age doesn’t *matter*,” she spat before softening. “Genes are genes.”

There was a pause. The sound of tissues being pulled through a box. Cars passing. Ice chips shifting in the freezer.

Your dad sighed through his nose. “So call. Make her an appointment.”

You retreated to your room, head aching, intestines coiling. It was the first time you wondered *why me*, a refrain that would later become instinctual, near-mantric.

The next week, a motherly woman spread a freezing gel over your naked chest and told your mom not to worry. The bud wasn’t an early sign of illness, she announced, but of becoming a young lady.

“You’re sure? She’s really okay?” On your mom’s lap, the same blue shirt, folded. “Her grandmother ...”

The woman shook her head. “Your daughter is the picture of health.” And then she smiled. “Aren’t you, sweetheart?”

On the ride home, you passed a cemetery, mossy and underloved. You frowned at one of its many weather-worn angels. How unfair, you said to it, to die the summer you are ten.

*Whymewhymewhymewhy*

*What are the symptoms?*

Symptoms of **hypochondria** include:

- Compulsively googling *swollen lymph node right side is it meningitis, Lyme or peritonsillar abscess; Sjogren's syndrome symptoms; flu incubation period; does the meningitis vaccine make you immune; bruise on thigh won't go away; Romaine lettuce recall; is meningitis airborne; pictures of ringworm on hairline; meningitis rash; TSS how rare; can worrying about being sick make you sick, etc.* and doing so at any point between the hours of one and six a.m., often nightly
- Insomnia
- Low device battery
- Comorbid fear of germs; paranoia
- Possessing a larger medical vocabulary than most of your peers
- Compulsively checking yourself for swollen lymph nodes; dry eyes; sore throat; neck pain; bruises; stomachaches; joint weakness; shortness of breath; fungal infections, etc. and doing so as needed throughout the day
- Failing to distinguish between real and imagined bodily sensations
- Trusting (what you believe to be) your intuition more than any doctor, scan, swab, throat culture, or blood test
- Exhausting and/or aggravating your loved ones
  - “You’re cr\*zy,” a close friend says to you after a particularly bad flare-up.  
“You’re cr\*zy,” she repeats, “I need to hear you say you’re cr\*zy.”

Other symptoms include a boy telling you he will protect you, from everything, and you, eighteen, trying mightily to believe him. What a fruitless promise for a boy to make, you'll later think.

*How is it diagnosed?*

The winter you were nineteen, you were sitting in a small exam room while your mother, forty-eight, lay with her shirt off on a paper-covered bed. You draped her rumpled clothes over your thighs and looked away as the dermatologist lifted her right breast, revealing what you had heard described as a small but angry red.

“I’ve been using the prescription for weeks, but it’s just not going away,” your mom began. “I’m afraid it might be something more serious. I have this awful feeling.”

The doctor shined a flashlight on the spot, inspected it for a few moments, and turned the light off. Her expressionlessness unnerved you.

“We can go ahead with a biopsy, if it would make you comfortable,” she said, letting your mom’s gown fall, “but I really don’t see anything worrying here. Honest-to-goodness. You know, we women—” she smiled knowingly at you—“we get these imperfections, naturally, as we grow older. These little marks of time.”

It’s like looking in a mirror, you thought, nodding past the doctor. Like facing a future foe, but she is, you are, right here, tethered tirelessly to your other.

That semester, you had taken a course on ancient medicine, in which you learned the etymology of *diagnosis*.

“The word itself,” Professor Fowler offered, “has nothing to do with medicine, nor even with the body. At its most basic, to diagnose is just to know apart—to discern between.”

Ironically, your own diagnosis, made to you and by you while a skin doctor stood at hand, relied on your diminished ability to distinguish yourself from the woman who made you. You couldn’t cut that cord, couldn’t sever its length from your then-strangled frame. And it’s that very un-undoing that made you diagnosable—that made you, in other words, dis-eased.

*Wewomenwewomenwewomenwhyme*

*How is it treated?*

Treatment options for **hypochondria** include falling asleep at twenty-one next to a boy with pretty eyes, so that, upon waking in the sepia predawn, you can forgo your symptom search, fixating instead on the gentle slope of those generous lashes. I’m here to support you however you need, he’ll soon whisper. They include distancing yourself from the people who stigmatize your illness, their tongues sore with misplaced spite, a most hideous sibilance. They include surrounding yourself with the people who might not understand **hypochondria** but who give listening a try anyway, who bear the patience of saints and the candor of sibyls. They include reading, writing, learning new words. They include spelling out all the ways in which you and your mother differ: she doesn’t like fresh mozzarella you do she won’t go out without a face shield anymore you will you don’t know how to spell ~~borborygmi~~ borborygmi she does you are a

practicing Jew she is an aspiring astrologist you are a Pisces she is a Cancer she speaks Hebrew you're on Duolingo she gives killer hugs you receive them her favorite color is pink and yours is blue, is blue, has always, always been blue.

And so, in that way, treatment is not all that different from diagnosis. Both demand a separation from, a division between. And both can hurt like a mother.

“Folks in medicine often misremember the symbol for medicine—a kind of Mandela effect, or what have you.” As Professor Fowler spoke, he made a backwards C with his forefinger and thumb and flicked his wrist a few times. You understood it to be his way of conveying nuance, particularity, distinction.

“They mistake it for the caduceus, the staff carried by Hermes.” On the board, he called up an image of a rod ringed with two entangled serpents. Each had a dot for an eye and was staring squarely at the other.

“The true symbol of medicine,” he continued, scrolling down, “is the rod of Asclepius: one snake only.”

You recalled this lesson, and that sharp flick of the wrist, when your mother informed you, rather plainly, that she would kill herself if anything ever happened to you. (You were at the kitchen table, and an ice cube tumbled out of the freezer, apropos of nothing. You thought you might vomit, or hate her. Both felt vile. Neither seemed particularly novel. A mask hung limp from one corner of her chair. Vile. You loved her. You were sure you would be sick.) Because it was in that moment that you saw the danger in the caduceus, in the coiling of twin serpents. How they will catch each other's eye, an eye that might as well be their own, and, in that fixation, inadvertently smother each other cold.

Energetic snakesness can be managed. It can. But it must be untangled from the source of its energy, which is to say, shed of the threat of its undoing.

You are busy writing about **hypochondria** when it occurs to you: You have not yet determined the word's actual etymology.

You open a tab, then pause.

Wait. Close that tab. You close it. Because *ma pitom?* what for? You have all the information you need.