To check your internet settings, open up IE, click on Tools, then Internet Options. Click on the tab that says Connections. Then click the 'LAN Settings...' button. There you can make sure proxy is checked off. This is assuming you have IE 6.

To see if your network card is working, you can open the start menu, click run, and type in 'ipconfig' in the command prompt. It will show you your IP address. I'm assuming you have a DSL/Cable connection with a router to hook up more than one computer at a time. Most broadband routers default to an address range of 192.168.1.xxx. See if your's falls in this range with a subnet mask of 255.255.255.0. Of course, if your router defaults to a 10.x.x.x address, check to make sure yours matches the routers address range and subnet mask. For example, a router that is on 192.168.1.1 255.255.255.0 will not be able to see a client that is on 169.254.1.1 255.255.0.0. And, if your IP address shows up as 169.254.x.x, then there something wrong because 169.254 is the address range Windows assigns when it can't reach a DHCP server (your router).

But odds are, if everything else works except for search engines, it is not going to be a hardware problem. Do a search on you hard drive for a file called 'hosts'. On XP, it is in X:\Windows\System32\drivers\etc\hosts. Open it up. What it does was let you type in the IP address and DNS name of servers, so that your local computer doesn't have to lookup the domain name whenever you type it into the browser. For example:

When I type in 'www.n00bstories.com', my browser calls up my DNS server and asks it for the IP address of n00bstories.com. If it doesn't know, it then calls another DNS server, and so on, and so on, until finally a DNS server says 'Hey! http://www.n00bstories.com is 140.99.186.3!!' Then, the DNS servers that were looking for it cache it locally, so that the next time I go looking for it, my DNS server will have it and won't have to go looking for it.

So, if in the 'hosts' file, I typed:
140.99.186.3   http://www.n00bstories.com
And then I went and typed http://www.n00bstories.com into my browser, my computer would automatically know that n00bstories.com is 140.99.186.3 and doesn't even have to call up a DNS server to find it.

This leads me to the loopback address, 127.0.0.1. 127.0.0.1 is basically your computer. What it's best used for is internal testing of the TCP/IP stack. But thats unimportant for you. All you need to know is that if you tried to ping 127.0.0.1 or tried to type into a web browser or ftp client, all you would be doing is trying to reach yourself. So, if my 'hosts' file looks like this:

127.0.0.1   http://www.n00bstories.com

and I opened up a web browser and typed in 'www.n00bstories.com', my browser would look it up in the 'hosts' file, substitute 127.0.0.1 for http://www.n00bstories.com and I would come up with a big fat 404.

So, explanation aside, check the 'hosts' file to make sure someone isn't playing a joke on you by manually typing sites you visit often into the hosts file. Not that I would ever do such a thing. Or another good one is to take a picture of their desktop with all their icons, then delete all their icons, and use the picture you took as the background so it looks like they're all there...

Not that I would ever do that either...

Anyways, if its not manual entries in the 'hosts' file either, then come back and let us know.