

This Just In... reports are a quick summary of new health marketing and communication research and trends. These brief “nuggets” spotlight new findings with communication practice implications for CDC and its public health partners.

Brought to you by the Strategic and Proactive Communication Branch in the Division Communication Services, Office of the Associate Director for Communication, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Just half of adults with chronic conditions use the internet; but once online, they are avid consumers of health information.

Research objective: To look at the way the Internet is changing how Americans make health care decisions. Previous research estimates that between 75% and 80% of Internet users have looked online for health information. Are these estimates expected to be higher for people living with a disability and/or disease?

Methods: A national phone survey of 2,928 adults 18 years of age and older was conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates. Respondents were asked about whether they use the Internet to look for health or medical information, including questions about their health and specific health topics.

Findings: About a fifth of American adults say that a disability, handicap, or chronic disease keeps them from participating fully in work, school, housework, or other activities. Adults living with a disability or chronic disease are less likely than others to go online, but once online, are avid consumers. Half (51%) of those living with a disability or chronic disease go online, compared to 74% of those who report no chronic conditions. Eighty-six percent of Internet users living with a disability or chronic illness have looked online for information on at least one of 17 health topics, compared with 79% of Internet users with no chronic conditions.

These online health consumers are known as e-patients because they use the Internet to gather information about a medical condition of interest to them. E-patients with chronic conditions are less likely than others to start their information queries at search engines, but are more likely than other health seekers to go online for information about their own conditions. They also have mostly positive things to say about their online health searches, but are more likely than others to report frustration as well. Interestingly, most e-patients with chronic conditions do not consistently check the source and date of the health information they find online. The impact of the most recent search for health information was most deeply felt by internet users with chronic conditions who had received a serious diagnosis or experienced a health crisis in the past year.

Practice implications for health marketers and communication professionals:

Many more people have access to high-speed Internet connections in their homes than had a home computer a decade ago. The question is whether they are using the Internet to search for health information; at least for patients with chronic conditions they are less likely to go online but once they do, they are avid consumers of health information. Since this is a finding that could apply to any type of patient, perhaps public health communicators should consider reaching patients in two waves: First contact them at doctors' offices with information about specific diseases, how to conduct an online search for health information, and the credibility of various medical websites. In the second wave, contact patients through health messages disseminated via the Internet.

Formal Citation: Fox, S. (2008, August 26). The engaged e-patient population. Pew Internet & American Life Project. (Non-peer reviewed research report)

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