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Health Problems and Help Seeking Behavior at the Internet

Nuray Turan*, Nurten Kaya, Gülsün Özdemir Aydın

*Istanbul University, Florence Nightingale Nursing Faculty, Department of Fundamentals of Nursing, İstanbul, 34381, Turkey

Abstract

Interest in the internet as a communication tool for health-related information is growing rapidly. The profile of online health consumers can be broadly defined as patients, patients’ friends/relatives, and citizens in general. Health information-seeking behavior varies depending on type of information sought, reasons for, and experience of, searching. However, little is known about how people use the internet in relation to other sources for health information.

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1. Introduction

The number of internet users has increased considerably worldwide. The internet is used for health purposes by the general public, and the importance of the internet as a source of health information is growing (Takahashi et al., 2011). Additionally, health-related websites have gained popularity increasingly. Recent reports suggest that about four in 10 adults and one in four adolescents have used the internet to access health information in the previous year (Baker et al., 2003).

Internet-based health information is accessed from a variety of sources, including websites run by organizations, homepages run by individuals, and online support groups where people actively exchange health information and blogs. Online health information has been giving opportunity to consumers and health care professionals for interactive health communication approach. Health care seekers appear to be using the internet to enhance their medical care; they report using the information online to diagnose a problem and feel more comfortable about their health provider’s advice given the information found on the internet. Access to reliable disease information online has been linked to reduced anxiety, increased feelings of self-efficacy, and decreases in utilization of ambulatory care.

* Corresponding author Tel.: +90 212 440 00 00x27086; fax: +90 212 224 49 90
E-mail addresses: nkaraman@istanbul.edu.tr, nuray_karamana@yahoo.com
care. Therefore health-related websites have the potential to powerfully influence the attitudes and behavior of consumers (Ybarra & Suman, 2006).

2. Use of the Health-Related Websites

The advantage of the internet is that it is widely available (home, work, libraries), convenient (24 hours a day at home) and anonymous. Health information has permeated the internet. Electronic health information is becoming ubiquitous (Williams, Huntington & Nicholas, 2003). Health information is one of the most frequently sought topics on the Internet (McMullan, 2006). The amount of health information available online is astounding. Using the most common method consumers rely on to find healthcare information online a keyword search on “health” at a popular search engine recently generated 473,000,000 results (Ybarra & Suman, 2006).

In the last decade, the percentage of adults who have accessed the Internet to look for health information has rapidly increased (McMullan, 2006). In a national survey in the Netherlands in 2012, 81% of people aged 65-75 years used the Internet and 54% used the Internet for health information. Research shows that online health consumers tend to be more educated, earn more, and have high-speed internet access at home and at work (Eysenbach 1998; Ybarra & Suman, 2006).

Reuters (2003) reported that on average 53% of Americans search the internet for health information and, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2003), of the 63% of Americans who access the Internet (128 million people), 66% of these look for health and medical information. Eysenbach (1998) estimated that, on a global level, of the 278 million internet searches that are being conducted each day, approximately 12.5 million searches are health related.

Internet users searching for health information will even go to sites aimed at health professionals Understanding who is more likely to use the internet as a health information tool is an important aspect of understanding how the internet is transforming health care (McMullan, 2006).

3. Effects of Internet on Health Behaviors

Health-related websites have the potential to powerfully influence the attitudes and behavior of consumers. However, despite the many texts available on health and the internet, not much is known about how much patients actually use the internet to look up health information in their daily lives (Hart et al.2004). The internet moderately improved users' health-related knowledge and attitudes but seldom changed their health-related abilities and activities (Takahashi et al., 2011).

Access to reliable disease information online has been linked to reduced anxiety, increased feelings of self-efficacy, and decreases in utilization of ambulatory care. Studies report that internet health information seekers are more likely to have health concerns; adult seekers are more likely to rate themselves as having poor health status and adolescent seekers are more likely to demonstrate clinical impairment or depressive symptomatology compared to nonseekers (Ybarra & Suman, 2006).

Although more and more Americans are using the internet for healthcare information, little is known about how this information affects their health behaviors (Kassirer, 1995). Baker et al.(2003) have found that approximately 40% of respondents with internet access reported using the internet to look for advice or information about health or health care in 2001. Six percent reported using e-mail to contact a physician or other health care professional (Baker et al., 2003).

However, some have drawn attention to the dangers of patients using the internet for health information. For example, some raise the potential for misdiagnosis and exploitation (Eysenbach & Diepgen,1998; Healthfield,
Pitty&Hanka, 1998). Others suggest that internet use can erode patients' faith in the authority of health-care practitioners. In response to such concerns, health-care providers have established classificatory systems for evaluating the scientific worth of web information (Impicciatore et al., 1997; Silberg et al., 1997). Almost half (48%) of health information seekers indicate that their findings help them to take better care of themselves. Two-thirds (67%) of adults also report that Internet health information has increased their understanding of health issues (Baker et al., 2003).

Studies report that seekers are more likely to have health concerns; adult health seekers are more likely to rate themselves as having poor health status and adolescent health seekers are more likely to demonstrate clinical impairment or depressive symptomatology compared to non-seekers. Middle-aged adults are more likely to search for information online compared to their older and younger adult peers, as are females compared to males (Baker et al., 2003; Gould et al., 2002).

3. Internet Usage on Health Care

The internet has been recognized for many years as an important, if concerning, mechanism for transforming health care (Kassirer, 1995; Hüfken et al., 2004). The internet has attracted considerable attention as a means to improve health and health care delivery, but it is not clear how prevalent the internet use for health care really is or what impact it has on health care utilization (Baker et al., 2003).

There are three main health application areas of the internet. They are; communication, such as e-mail; community, i.e. bulletin boards, mailing lists, chat rooms, electronic support groups; content, i.e. provision of health information on the Internet (Mcmullan, 2006).

Health care seekers appear to be using the internet to enhance their health care; they report using the information online to diagnose a problem and feel more comfortable about their health provider’s advice given the information found on the internet. Support seekers tend to be of slightly lower income compared to non-support seekers. They are also significantly more likely to have searched for information about a loved one’s medical or health condition, signaling that many of these consumers may be caretakers (Ybarra & Suman, 2006).

Available estimates of use and impact vary widely. Without accurate estimates of use and effects, it is difficult to focus policy discussions or design appropriate policy activities (Baker et al., 2003).

Health professionals are responding to the more ‘Internet informed’ patient in one or more of three ways: (1) the health professional feels threatened by the information the patient brings and responds defensively by asserting their “expert opinion” (health professional-centered relationship). Health professionals, especially those with poor information technology (IT) skills, may feel their medical authority being threatened by the information the patient brings and respond defensively by asserting their “expert opinion” (Hart et al., 2004). (2) The health professional and patient collaborate in obtaining and analyzing the information (patient-centered relationship). In this situation, the health professional and patient collaborate. After all, many patients not only have the time, but also the motivation to search for information regarding their health problems, and, as they are often only interested in one condition, their search is usually focused. Health professionals, on the other hand, do not have as much time to search for every clinical condition they might encounter, but they do have the skill and knowledge to analyses the information and assess the relevance to the particular patient (Hollander & Lanier, 2001). (3) The health professional will guide patients to reliable health information websites (Internet prescription) (McMullan, 2003). In this way, the health professional can guide the patient to reliable and accurate information. However, it then becomes important for the health professional not only to know the specific information, but also where to find it on the Internet. As it is impossible to keep track of all the information that is on the Internet, health professionals should know about reliable quality repositories of health information and medical links (Garber & Eiser, 2001).

It is important that health professionals acknowledge patients’ search for knowledge, that they discuss the
information offered by patients and guide them to reliable and accurate health websites. Therefore, health-care professionals need to improve their own skills in Internet use (McMullan, 2006).

4. Conclusion

The internet is a resource available to an increasing number. Continuing efforts to maximize the potential of internet could have great value. As the internet becomes more and more integrated into the lives of health consumers, the crossroads between health information online and healthcare utilization patterns are becoming ever more apparent. But, people are using the internet for healthcare information, little is known about how this information affects their health behaviors. Discussions of the role of the internet in health care and the development of policies that might influence this role should not presume that use of the internet for health information is universal or that the internet strongly influences health care utilization. Thus, addressing the needs of this population in term of health related internet searches is vital. For that reason, the authorities, health administers and even web site developers shall learn about the behaviors of live process and people's during online health information search. It can improve patients’ understanding of their medical condition and their self-efficacy. Additionally, it can empower them to make health decisions and to talk to their physician, resulting in a more patient-centred interaction between patient and health professional. It is recommended that future studies should focus on medical outcomes to better understand how the internet is influencing behaviour, life activities, disease-specific outcomes and healthcare utilization patterns.

References


