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Accessing Reliable Health Information On The Internet

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ACCESSING RELIABLE HEALTH INFORMATION ON THE INTERNET

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The Problem and Need

- The definition of quick access to healthcare has changed over the years. While the definition in the past may have been closer to gaining access to healthcare professionals who could give you information and treat you, today the definition now includes gaining access to reliable health information over the internet, helping patients decide if they need to seek care.
- Patients want to know about medications, nutrition, fitness, chronic and acute illnesses, and how to address their complaints and symptoms. With the internet at their fingertips, information about these topics can easily be found. However it can be overwhelming to search the web for reliable health information. Finding sites that have accurate, current information, free of bias and from an authoritative group (the definition of reliable health information) is an important step towards healthcare equality.
- Many websites including FamilyDoctor.org (by the AAFP Foundation), US Dept. of Health & Human Services, the Food & Drug Administration, the Patient Advocate Foundation, the National Institute of Health, AARP, the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality and many other organizations provide user guides to help patients access reliable health information on the internet. ^{1,2,3}
- One important way that we can help patients in this endeavor is for healthcare organizations to channel patients to websites that offer reliable healthcare information by offering them support guides and suggested internet websites that have been vetted and found to provide reliable health information.
- According to a December 2013 Report by PEW Research ^{4,5}
 - *87% of U.S. adults use the internet; 72% of internet users say they looked online for health information within the past year; 31% of cell phone owners and 52% of smartphone owners, have used their phone to look up health or medical information; with 77% of online health seekers say they began their last session at a search engine such as Google, Bing, or Yahoo.*
- Benefits of supporting patients' access to reliable health information over the internet include improved quality of healthcare, timely access to healthcare, and increased efficiency in healthcare interactions.
 - *A 1999 study found that patients with access to consumer healthcare information systems spend less time during ambulatory care visits, make fewer phone calls to providers, and experiencing fewer and shorter hospitalizations. ⁶*
 - *A 2001 study found that patients with access to consumer healthcare information systems benefited by gaining information, social support and increasing their participation in health care. ⁷*
 - *A different 1999 study found that that patients with access to consumer healthcare information systems, used during office visits, could obtain useful health information and could use this information to change health behaviors on the basis of this information. It also found that: ⁸*
 - 90% were more satisfied with their visit because of the availability of the information.
 - 94% of users found the information helpful.

Public Health Cost

- According to the CDC, the total national health expenditures in 2014 was \$3,000,000,000,000 or roughly \$9,500 per person, making up roughly 17.5% of the US's GDP ⁹

- According to Gallup's 2015 annual Health and Healthcare poll, the cost of healthcare still delays healthcare visits for about 1 in 3 in U.S. ¹⁰


- In 2012, the cost of avoidable healthcare costs due to delayed treatment in the U.S. was \$39,500,000,000. ¹¹
 - *These costs are only expected to rise due to expected increase in insurance coverage, chronic diseases, and an aging population may place further stresses on the need for proper medication use to prevent avoidable healthcare costs.*
 - *Some of these costs are associated with wasted health facility time and provider-patient time debunking myths and inaccuracies that patients read about on the internet*

Community Perspectives:

- “I am so surprised by our findings, I didn’t realize such a large percentage of our patients were using the internet to learn about their health, and how many of them were interested in our help in finding reliable information. This study is going to change the way we educate our patients, how we address patients’ medical concerns and change the ways in which we convey information to our patients with limited mobility. I now feel more comfortable suggesting the use of phone apps to help remind our patients to take their meds, lose weight, and look up information about their illnesses and medications.” – **Lynn Rivers, RN/Case Manager**
- “I think this is a wonderful project, so many of our patients use google to self-diagnose themselves and to look up information after their appointments. Many end up calling the office concerned that they are dying, or afraid of dying after reading something they found on an obscure website. The worst is when patients that really are sick misdiagnose themselves, choose not to call us, and we end up seeing them after something bad has happened as a consequence of delayed treatment. Having reliable internet resources to share with our patients will make such a difference.” – **Melissa Gooley, Nurse Manager**
- “This study is very interesting and worthwhile. It is very helpful for us to have a list of reliable internet resources that we can use to help direct patients to so that they can learn more about their conditions and help them look up information after appointments – like which foods are higher in vitamin D, and what we are talking about when we discuss the health implications of diabetes. We spend a good amount of time reassuring patients that they do not have rare diseases and debunking myths that they read about after clicking on a link on Facebook. The more time we can spend actually managing our patients’ health the better off we will be.” – **Maurice Racine, MD/Medical Director**

Intervention and Methodology:

- In a low socioeconomic farming town at a rural family medicine office in upstate NY, I wanted to find a way to help reduce barriers to healthcare and help patients take an active role in their health using free internet resources. My idea was to help connect patients with reliable health information without needing to travel to the healthcare clinic, understanding that some patients may be limited in their ability to travel, take time off from work or afford the copays/expenses associated with seeing their providers.
- As such, I chose to investigate access to the internet, the ways in which users accessed the health information online, how patients liked to get their health information and their perceived barriers regarding using the internet to find reliable health information.
- 54 patients at the North Country Family Health Center were surveyed. The 7 question surveys were offered to patients in the waiting room over 4 consecutive week days (Tuesday – Friday), with the goal of surveying 40-60 patients.
- The results of the survey were shared with the office, and led to the production of a 20 page, 4.25in by 5.5in, pamphlet containing numerous internet sources where reliable health information could be found. With the idea that these pamphlets could be handed out to patients to help direct them to reliable websites and used by the staff to help direct patients over the phones.



Accessing Reliable Health Information Online Survey
July - August 2016

It can be overwhelming to search the web for reliable health information. Finding sites that have accurate, current information, free of bias and from an authoritative group may be made easier with some helpful guidance from your primary medical care office.

According to a 2013 PEW Research study 59% of U.S. adults say they have looked online for information about a range of health topics in the past year and 35% of U.S. adults say they have gone online specifically to try to figure out what medical condition they or someone else might have.

In an effort to assist our patients, this survey is being provided to learn how we can best assist you and your families in accessing reliable health information over the internet.

1. Gender:
Mark only one oval.


Male
 Female
 Other _____

2. What is your age range?
Mark only one oval.

Under 18
 18 - 29
 30 - 39
 40 - 49
 50 - 64
 65+

3. Do you have access to the internet?
Mark only one oval.

Yes; 5 - 7 days per week
 Yes; 3 - 4 days per week
 Yes; 1 - 2 days per week
 No; but plan to get access in the future
 No; no plans to gain access in the future



4. Which devices do you use to access the internet?
Check all that apply.

Desktop Computer
 Laptop Computer
 Tablet
 Smartphone
 Printed Media (Magazines, News Papers)
 Other: _____

5. Which sources do you use to learn about health information?
Check all that apply.

Doctor Visits
 Internet Websites
 Smartphone Apps
 Television
 Friends/Family
 Library
 Other: _____

6. What are your concerns about accessing health information over the internet?
Check all that apply.

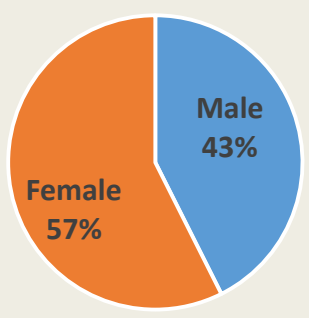
Difficulty finding trustworthy sites
 Concern about misinformation
 Amount of information is overwhelming
 Information is too confusing/hard to understand
 It is easier to just ask your doctor/medical provider
 Information is out of date
 Concerns about being scammed
 Concerns about your privacy
 Concerned about only finding the most serious/fatal diseases
 No concerns regarding accessing reliable health information
 Other: _____

7. Would you be interested in an informational packet that includes a list of suggested electronic resources which you can use to learn about reliable medical information?
Mark only one oval.

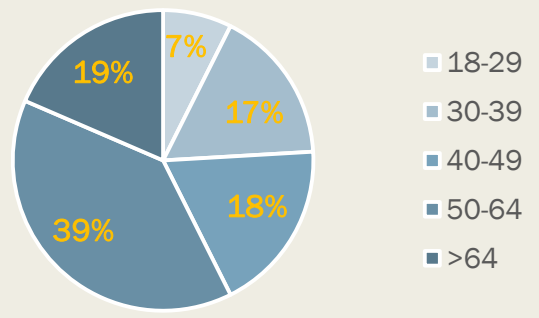
Yes
 No

Results:

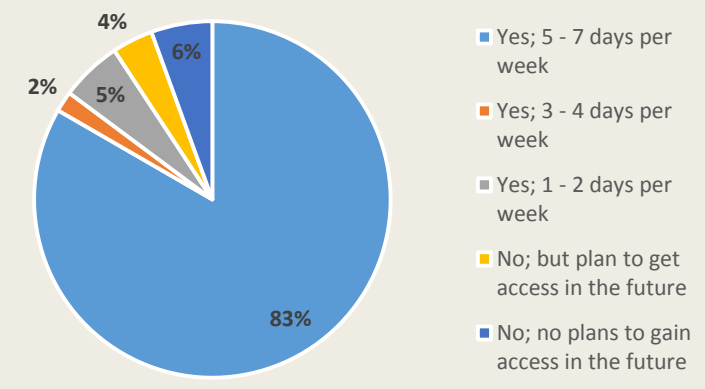
Genders



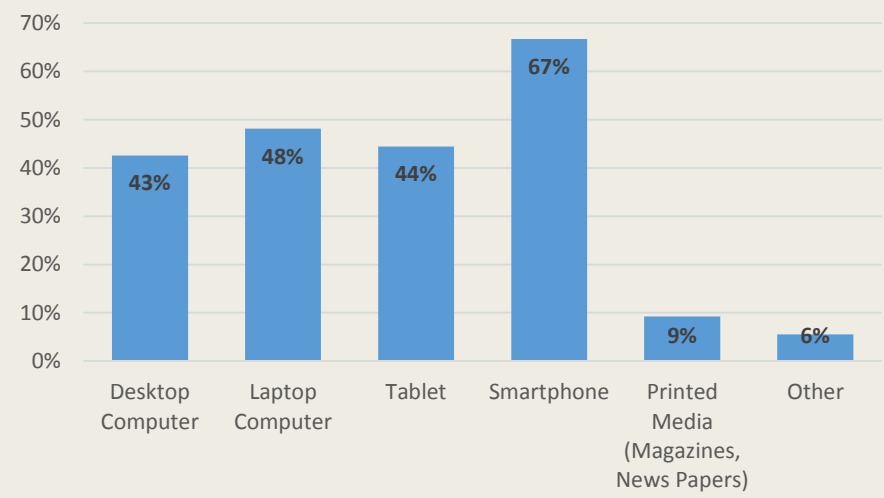
Ages Range



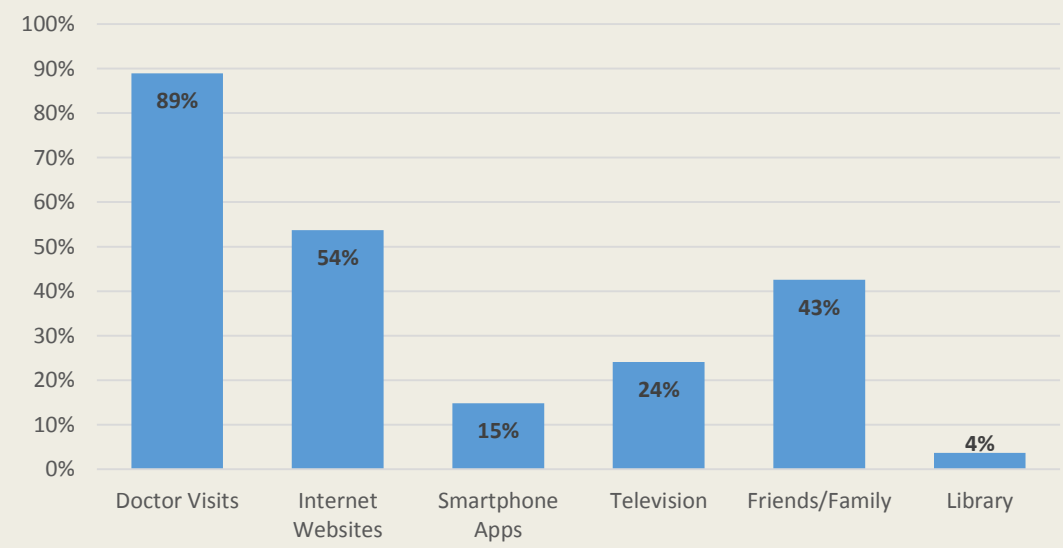
Internet Access



Device Type Used To Access RHI

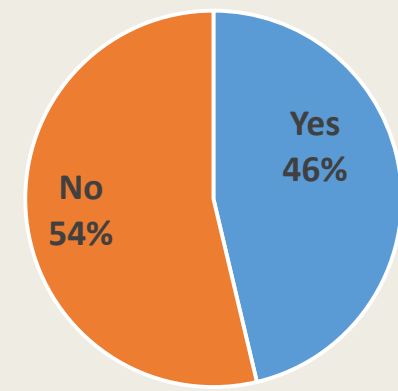


Sources of Health Information

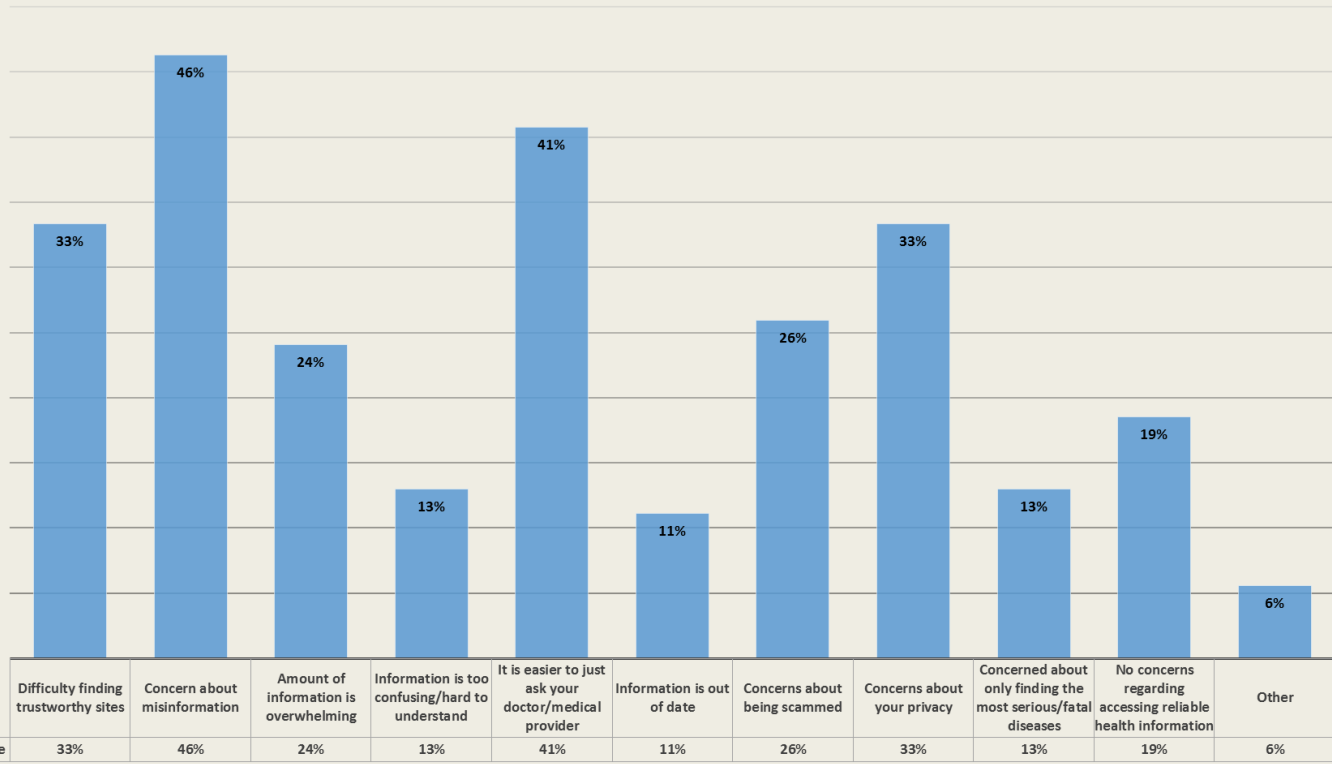


Results:

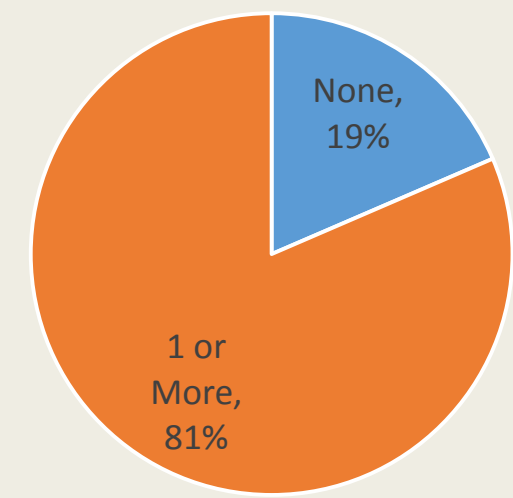
Interest in Informational Packet



Concerns About Finding Reliable Health Information



Concerns About Using the Internet to Find RHI



Data and Implications :

- Both male and female genders were adequately represented (57% female).
- Age ranges were disproportionately older, with 39% of respondents 65 years or older, 18% between the ages of 50 to 64, 19% between the ages of 40 to 49, 17% between the ages of 30 to 39, and a mere 7% under the age of 30.
- Somewhat surprisingly, 90% of respondents have access to the internet at least once a week, with 83% having access 5 to 7 days, 2% with access 3 to 4 days, and 5% with access 1 to 2 days per week. 10% of respondents were without access to the internet, and 40% of those without access to the internet were planning to get access in the future.
- Smartphones were the most used device used to access health information (67%), with laptop computers in second place (48%), and with tablets (44%) and desktop computers (43%) coming in at 3rd and 4th. Printed media was the least used source of health information at 9%.
- 90% of patients used their doctor's visits to get health information, using internet websites (54%) as their next most used source of health information with 43% getting information from friends and family. Interestingly, 15% of respondents used smartphone apps as a source of health information, and only 4% of respondents using the library.
- 81% of respondents had at least once concern about using the internet for health information. The biggest concerns regarding using the internet to learn about health information were misinformation (46%), difficulty finding trustworthy websites (33%), concerns about privacy (33%), concerns about being scammed (26%) and being overwhelmed with information (24%).
- Not surprisingly, 41% of respondents felt it was just easier to just ask their doctor or provider than use the internet to find health information.
- Given the above information, it was less surprising that 46% of respondents expressed interest in an informational packet that might include a list of suggested electronic resources which they could use to learn about reliable medical information, to help guide their search.

Effectiveness and Limitations:

- **Effectiveness:** I believe that the survey results offer valuable data regarding internet access, the devices in which patients are using to access the internet, the forms in which patients like to get their health information from, and the fears and desires of patients to have better access to information they can rely on. This information can be used by the office staff to more effectively educate patients about their health and promote the idea of patients taking an active roll their health by being informed. Effectively removing some of the barriers to reliable health information.
- **Limitations** include the number of survey responses (54), the fact that the survey was taken during the summer, which may have impacted the types of patients coming in, the older age of the respondents (57% >50 years of age and 7% <30 years of age). That the survey was carried out over a 4 day period, Tuesday through Friday, between the hours of 7:30 and 7pm, which may have limited respondents who could take time off during the week, missing respondents who were more likely to come to appointments on weekends.

Recommendations and Actions:

- **Action:** In short, with **90%** of surveyed patients responding that they **have internet access**, **80%** responding that they had **1 or more concerns regarding their use of the internet** to find reliable health information, and **46%** of surveyed patients responding that they **would be interested in an informational packet** that that included a list of suggested electronic resources which they could use to access reliable medical.
 - *I decided to produce a 20 page pamphlet covering a broad range of health related topics ranging from mental health, general health, and mobile health, to patient assistance programs to help patients pay for their medications.*

- **Recommendations for Office:**
 1. Ask patients where they get their healthcare information in a screening question when patients arrive in the practice.
 2. Talk to patients about accessing reliable healthcare information & provide specific information on reliable websites like those found in the information pamphlet that I produced.
 3. Encourage patients to take control of their health by being informed about their health issues. And encourage the use of the reliable health websites that you suggest, and share some of their findings when they come in.

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Remember: The information found on the websites in this brochure and any information found on the internet does not take the place of your doctor. Discuss any information you may find with your doctor.

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Mobile health

Websites

MedlinePlus (in español)
medlineplus.gov
Mobile version of MedlinePlus. Easy to search on your smartphone.

National Cancer Institute (in español)
cancer.gov
Mobile version of the National Cancer Institute. Easy to search on your smartphone.

Applications

Find a Health Center App (Free)
Search "find a health center" in the App Store and Google Play.
Healthcare centers' address, website, and phone number. Also links to Google Maps for directions.

First Aid App (Free) (in español)
Search "first aid" in the App Store and Google Play.
Clicks advice for everyday emergencies. Scan severe weather to an asthma attack by the American Red Cross.

QuitSTART App (Free)
Search "quit start" in the App Store and Google Play.
Inch, advice, and tip to quit smoking for teens and adults. Track how many days you've quit, handle cravings, and win challenges.

Lean 10 App (Free with in-app purchases)
Search "lean 10" in the App Store and Google Play.
Weight loss program and calorie counter.

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Before You Begin Your Search

"Don't believe everything you read." It's an old warning that is especially true for health-related information you find on the World Wide Web.

Authority
Is the sponsor/owner of the website a Federal agency, medical school, or large professional or nonprofit organization, or is it related to one of these? Websites that end in .org, .gov or .edu are usually the most reliable websites for health facts.

Bias
Is the mission or goal of the sponsor clear? Can you see who works for the agency or organization and who authored the information? Is there a way to contact the sponsor of the website?

Currency
When was the information written or webpage last updated? Medical research never stops. Make sure the information is no older than 3 years.
<https://www.nlm.nih.gov/health/publication/online-health-information>

If you have questions about a website with health information? Check the accuracy and validity of websites with the HealthWeb

Navigator (HHN)
<http://healthwebcare.org/>
HHN continuously monitors and evaluates health websites using an expert review panel ranking websites for accuracy and clarity.

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Medicine information

Pillbox
pillbox.nlm.nih.gov
Facts about pills, pictures of each pill, and side effects.

Consumer Med Safety
consumermedsafety.org
Tips for taking medicines safely including storing and discarding, and poisoning.

Quick Tip: Patient Assistance Programs (PAPs) help you if you can't afford your medicines

HHN Sliding Fee Program
<http://www.hhn.org/Services/PatientAssistance>
HHN Patient Assistance Program

Needy Meds (in español)
needy meds.org
Free or low cost medicine payment programs. (800-563-0897)

Partnership for Prescription Assistance
www.ppa.org
Payment help with medicines. Map of free clinics. Links to free or low cost diabetes supplies, hearing aids, vision, and more.

Herbal Supplements
Herbal Medicines
<http://medlineplus.gov/HerbalMedicine.html>
Information and facts about herbal medicine, their known health benefits and more.

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