

The Engaged E-patient Population

People turn to the internet for health information when the stakes are high and the connection fast

By Susannah Fox, Associate Director, Pew Internet & American Life Project
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The internet is changing the way Americans engage with information, whether they are choosing a president or making health care decisions. Two major drivers for this change are broadband adoption and personal motivation.

First, an update: The Pew Internet Project estimates that between 75% and 80% of internet users have looked online for health information. We get slightly different results for the size of the e-patient population depending on our survey strategy, but these results are close enough to make us confident we have the right contours of this group. Our estimate is also in line with Harris Interactive's latest data on health information seekers (81% of internet users; 66% of all adults).

We got the 75% reading in our October-December 2007 national phone survey, which included 2,054 adults ages 18 and older, including 500 cell phone users. In this survey we asked: "Do you ever use the internet to look for health or medical information?"

In surveys we conducted between 2003-2007 (and plan to repeat in coming months), respondents were prompted with questions about specific health topics, such as diet, drugs or alternative treatments, yielding a consistently higher estimate (80%) for the percentage of internet users who seek health information online in 2003, 2004 and 2006.

Information Gathering Now a Habit for Many

This latest Pew Internet Project survey confirms that information gathering has become a habit for many Americans, particularly those in the 55% of households with broadband connections. Home broadband has now joined educational attainment, household income and age as the strongest predictors of internet activity. For example, 78% of home broadband users look online for health information, compared with 70% of home dial-up users. Home broadband users are twice as likely as home dial-up users to do health research on a typical day -- 12% vs. 6%.

High-speed, always-on connections enable frequent and in-depth information searches, which is particularly attractive if something important is at stake.

And the searches aren't confined to medical issues. In politics, for example, more people are paying attention to this presidential campaign than they did to any other recent election. Seven in 10 registered voters say they have given "quite a lot of thought" to the coming presidential election, and many are going online to spread news and information about their candidate of choice or the race in general.

Some 63% of internet users (46% of all adults) are using the internet, e-mail or text messaging for political purposes. About 39% of internet users (29% of all adults) are digging into "unfiltered" campaign material, such as candidate debates, position papers and speech transcripts.

Supporters of presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) are more likely than supporters of presumptive Republican presidential nominee Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) to be using the internet for political purposes. Obama supporters are also more likely than McCain supporters to say it really matters who wins the 2008 presidential election.

Disability, Disease Tend To Increase Internet Usage

Similarly, in health care, people who feel they have a lot at stake are more likely to engage intensely with online resources. Internet users living with a disability or chronic disease are more likely than other internet users to be wide-ranging online health researchers and to report significant impacts from those searches. For example, 75% of e-patients with a chronic condition say their last health search affected a decision about how to treat an illness or condition, compared with 55% of other e-patients.

Newly diagnosed e-patients and those who have experienced a health crisis in the past year are also particularly tuned in: 59% say the information they found online led them to ask a doctor new questions or get a second opinion, compared with 48% of those who had not had a recent diagnosis or health crisis. Some 57% of recently challenged or diagnosed e-patients say they felt eager to share their new health or medical knowledge with others, compared with 45% of other e-patients.

Experienced e-patients are posting technical advice online about managing a certain disease as well as advising people about how to communicate with health care providers. Other e-patients

are gaining national attention by documenting significant problems with a generic drug, problems that FDA had failed to catch. Some people are uploading their "Observations of Daily Living" in order to track their symptoms or reactions to various stimuli.

Along with all this engagement, however, is an understanding that the internet is not a cure-all. Some 60% of internet users agree with the following statement: "The internet is full of misinformation and propaganda that too many voters believe is accurate."

On the health front, there is a generalized fear of misinformation, but the Pew Internet Project has evidence that people are being smart about the internet's place in their lives. A December 2007 study found that medical professionals were the dominant source for people with urgent health questions, which is not what we see in any of the other topics included in the survey: education, taxes, Medicare/Medicaid, changing job status or Social Security. For those issues, the internet or a government agency played much more important roles than did professionals.

The same study provided another data point about the place of the internet in Americans' lives: people who had encountered significant problems in the previous year were likely to report using not just one, but two to three different sources of information to help them solve their problems. Not surprisingly, 77% of those with home broadband access turned to the internet as one of their sources, compared with 57% of those with the slower dial-up access at home.

More than Convenience

It is not just the convenience that draws internet users, but the positive experiences that most people have with online research.

In health, the impact of an online information search is more likely to be helpful, not harmful. Thirty-one percent of e-patients say they or someone they know has been significantly helped by following medical advice or health information found on the internet. Only 3% of health seekers say they or someone they know has been seriously harmed by following the advice or information they found online.

In conclusion, the population of e-patients may have stabilized at 75% to 80% of internet users, but it is clear that broadband allows people to engage more deeply with information sources and with each other. And circumstances, such as a serious diagnosis or an important election, can kick that engagement into high gear.

(This column originally appeared on iHealthBeat: <http://www.ihealthbeat.org/>)

More on the Web:

- "[Number of 'Cyberchondriacs.'](#)" Harris Interactive
- "[Online Health Search 2006,](#)" Pew Internet & American Life Project
- "[Home Broadband 2008,](#)" Pew Internet & American Life Project
- "[Likely Rise in Voter Turnout Bodes Well for Democrats,](#)" Pew Research Center for the People and the Press
- "[The Internet and the 2008 Election,](#)" Pew Internet & American Life Project
- "[E-patients With a Disability or Chronic Disease,](#)" Pew Internet & American Life Project
- "[Information Searches That Solve Problems,](#)" Pew Internet & American Life Project
- "[How Cancer Survivors Provide Support on Cancer-Related Internet Mailing Lists,](#)" *Journal of Medical Internet Research*
- "[Inexact Copies: How Generics Differ From Brand Names,](#)" *Wall Street Journal*