

Online social networking linked to use of web for health info

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The use of social networking sites may have implications for accessing online health information, finds a new longitudinal study from the *Journal of Health Communication*.

"Socioeconomic and [demographic factors](#) that lead to the disparities in [social networking](#) sites could also contribute to disparities in seeking [health information](#) online," said the study's lead author, Yang Feng, Ph.D., associate professor in the department of [communication studies](#) at the University of Virginia's College at Wise.

"People who are active users of social [networking sites](#) may tend to be active online health information seekers. With the growth of social networking, the relationship between their use and people's likelihood to seek health information online was more obvious in 2010 than in 2008 and 2006."

Researchers analyzed data collected from phone interviews of 2,928 adults who took part in the Health Tracking Surveys from the Pew Internet & American Life Project during 2006, 2008 and 2010. The surveys asked participants whether they used

the Internet; used social networking sites such as Facebook; whether they searched for health information online, including information about a specific disease, medical treatment or doctors; and whether or not they or someone close to them had a chronic disease.

The researchers found significant disparities in use of social networking sites and the tendency to search for health information online. In all three years of the survey, age was the most significant factor in social networking site use, with younger people more likely to use them than older people. In 2010, women and people with higher incomes were more likely than men and people with lower incomes to use social networking sites.

Additionally, in 2008 and 2010, having a chronic disease and use of [online social networking](#) predicted people's likelihood of seeking information about a specific disease or medical condition online. In 2010, after controlling for demographic factors, people who used social networking sites were 131 percent more likely to seek information about a specific disease or medical problem online than people who did not use social media.

Older people were less likely to search for information about a specific treatment or doctor online. Non-Whites were less likely to search online for disease or treatment information. As expected, people with a chronic disease or a person close to them with a chronic disease were more likely to look for disease-specific information online but no more likely to search for information on doctors or hospitals.

"Even though social networking sites have grown over the years, some social groups, such as older men with low incomes and minorities, are not fully engaged with social networking and are less likely to obtain health information through these sites. Yet, we may still lack customized health education programs to target these people. This study helps

to identify those social groups who are not making good use of [social networking sites](#) throughout the years," noted Feng.

Ajay Sethi, Ph.D., associate professor in the department of population health sciences at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health, agreed with the study's findings but noted, "Whenever a new technology or intervention is introduced to a population, the early adopters are typically distinct from the late or never adopters."

The volume of information on diseases and conditions on the Internet is huge compared to the number of websites that review doctors and hospitals and those websites. "Those sites, pertaining to providers tends to be buried," said Sethi. "A Google search of a hospital name, for example, will bring up lots of links, and if you add 'review' you'll probably pull up mostly anonymous individuals."

He suggested healthcare providers ought to ask their patients, in a non-accusatory way where they get their information. "That can spark a discussion as to what is credible and what may not be. Many health care systems offer links to health websites through their own site or provide informational pages for patients."

More information: Yang Feng & Wenjing Xie (2014): Digital Divide 2.0: "The Role of Social Networking Sites in Seeking Health Information Online From a Longitudinal Perspective," *Journal of Health Communication: International Perspectives*, [DOI: 10.1080/10810730.2014.906522](https://doi.org/10.1080/10810730.2014.906522)

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