

Internet Provides Public with Health Care Information that They Value and Trust and Which Often Stimulates Discussion with Their Doctors

The number of cyberchondriacs (people looking for health information online) has plateaued at a high level

ROCHESTER, N.Y. – July 28, 2009 – The Internet has become a powerful influence in health care. Eleven years ago, in 1998, The Harris Poll reported that about one-quarter of all adults, 54 million people had ever gone online to look for health information. This number increased rapidly every year until 2007, when we found that 71% of adults, 160 million people, had done this. The great majority of users find this information reliable and many discuss it with their doctors.

However, last year and again this year we have found no increase in the number of cyberchondriacs (the word we use to describe these people). A new Harris Poll find that 67% of adults, 154 million people, now report having looked for health information online.

This nationwide Harris Poll of 1,010 U.S. adults surveyed by telephone by Harris Interactive between July 7 and 13, 2008 shows how much cyberchondriacs value the information they find online:

- The overwhelming majority (83%) of cyberchondriacs report that their search for information online was successful and almost half (45%) say it was “very successful”;
- An even larger majority (87%) believes that this information was reliable (but only 28% say it was “very reliable”);
- Fully 44% of cyberchondriacs have discussed information they obtained online with their doctors (however, this is lower than the 58% we reported in 2007); and,
- Half (49%) of cyberchondriacs have searched for information online based on discussions they had with their doctors.

There are two reasons why the number of cyberchondriacs has not increased for two years. One is that the proportion of adults who are online, which rose rapidly from 38% in 1998 to 79% in 2007, has not increased for the last two years. The other is that the proportion of those online who report having used the Internet to look for health information has remained remarkably steady, varying only from 71% to 84% over the last eleven years, and currently stands at 78% slightly lower than it was in 2007.

So What?

The Internet continues to provide a large majority of the public with information about health or health care that they find useful and reliable. About half of these cyberchondriacs have looked for information based on discussions with their doctors and almost half have discussed the information they found online with their doctors. The

Internet is surely helping to inform the public about health and health care and to stimulate discussions between doctors and patients that probably improve the doctor-patient relationship.

**TABLE 1
CYBERCHONDRIACS: TRENDS 1998-2009**

Base: All U.S. adults

	1998	1999	2001	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
All adults who are online*	38	46	63	67	69	74	77	79	76	79
All online adults who have ever looked online for health information	71	74	75	78	74	72	80	84	81	78
All adults who have ever looked online for health information	27	34	47	52	51	53	61	71	66	67
All adults who have looked online for health information in last month	NA	NA	27	NA	31	45	51	53	50	52
All adults who have ever looked online for health information + (millions)	54	69	97	109	111	117	136	160	150	154

*Includes those online from home, office, school, library or other location

+ Based on July 2008 U.S. Census estimate released January 2009 (230,100,000 total U.S. adults aged 18 or over).

NA = Not Asked

**TABLE 2
FREQUENCY OF ACCESSING HEALTH INFORMATION ONLINE: 1998 – 2009**

“How often do you look for information online about health topics – often, sometimes, hardly ever or never?”

Base: All U.S. adults who are online*

	1998	1999	2001	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Often	12	13	16	17	19	25	21	26	25	22
Sometimes	30	30	30	37	31	33	40	40	38	35
Hardly ever	29	31	30	23	24	14	19	18	17	21
Never	29	26	25	22	26	29	20	16	19	22
Total who have looked for health or medical information sometimes or often (NET)	42	43	46	54	50	58	61	66	64	57
Total who have ever looked for health or medical information (NET)	71	74	75	78	74	72	80	84	81	78

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding

*Includes those online from home, office, school, library or other location

TABLE 3
FREQUENCY OF LOOKING FOR HEALTH INFORMATION IN LAST MONTH: 2001-2009
 "About how many times have you looked for information online about health topics in the last month?"

Base: Have ever looked for health information online

	2001	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Not once	40	NA	21	14	23	26	25	22
1 or more (NET)	58	NA	60	85	76	74	75	77
1 or 2 times	29	NA	26	31	35	30	31	33
3 – 5 times	17	NA	14	29	23	21	25	21
6 – 9 times	3	NA	5	6	5	8	5	6
10 or more times	9	NA	15	19	14	16	14	18
Not sure	2	NA	19	1	1	*	*	1
Mean (average)	3.0	NA	5.1	6.8	5.2	5.7	4.8	5.4
Median	1.1	NA	2.0	3.0	2	2	2	2

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.
 NA = Not asked in 2003

TABLE 4
SUCCESS IN SEARCHING FOR INFORMATION ONLINE ABOUT HEALTH TOPICS
 "How successful were you in your search for information online about health topics? Were you...?"

Base: Have ever looked for health information online

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
	%	%	%	%	%
SUCCESSFUL (NET)	89	88	88	89	83
Very successful	46	42	37	41	45
Somewhat successful	43	46	50	48	38
Neither successful nor unsuccessful	2	4	5	3	5
UNSUCCESSFUL (NET)	6	7	6	4	9
Somewhat unsuccessful	3	4	3	2	4
Very unsuccessful	3	3	3	2	4
Not sure/Decline to answer	3	1	1	4	4

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

TABLE 5

RELIABILITY OF SEARCHING FOR INFORMATION ONLINE ABOUT HEALTH TOPICS:

"How reliable do you believe this information is concerning health topics? Is it...?"

Base: Have ever looked for health information online

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
	%	%	%	%	%
RELIABLE (NET)	90	87	86	86	87
Very reliable	37	25	26	24	28
Somewhat reliable	53	61	60	62	59
Neither reliable nor unreliable	4	7	6	5	4
UNRELIABLE (NET)	5	5	7	6	7
Somewhat unreliable	3	5	6	4	4
Very unreliable	2	1	1	2	3
Not sure/Decline to answer	1	2	1	3	2

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

TABLE 6

DISCUSSION WITH DOCTOR ABOUT INFORMATION FOUND ONLINE

"In the past year, have you ever discussed with your doctor the information you found online?"

Base: Have ever looked for health information online

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
	%	%	%	%	%
Yes (NET)	57	52	58	47	44
Yes, always do	15	13	12	13	7
Yes, sometimes do	25	21	22	15	22
Yes, have done once or twice	18	19	24	19	15
No, never do	43	48	42	53	56
Not sure/Decline to answer	*	*	*	*	*

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding

* Less than 0.5 percent.

TABLE 7

FREQUENCY OF SEARCHING MEDICAL INFORMATION ONLINE BASED ON DISCUSSION WITH DOCTOR

"Have you ever searched for medical information on the Internet based on a discussion with your doctor?"

Base: Have ever looked for health information online

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
	%	%	%	%	%
Yes (NET)	52	45	55	49	49
Yes, often	17	14	17	12	14
Yes, sometimes	36	31	38	38	35
No, never	48	55	45	50	51
Not sure/Decline to answer	*	*	*	*	*

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding

* Less than 0.5 percent.

Methodology

This Harris Poll was conducted by telephone within the United States between July 7 and 14, 2009 among 1,010 adults (aged 18 and over). Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region, number of adults in the household, number of phone lines in the household were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments. Therefore, Harris Interactive avoids the words “margin of error” as they are misleading. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different probabilities for pure, unweighted, random samples with 100% response rates. These are only theoretical because no published polls come close to this ideal.

These statements conform to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.

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