

## Number of “Cyberchondriacs” – Adults Going Online for Health Information – Has Plateaued or Declined

*2008 is first year since 1998 not to show an increase in those going online for health information.*

Ten years ago, in 1998, *The Harris Poll*® began measuring the number of people going online for healthcare information. At that time we reported that 54 million people had done so at least once. Since then the number of those people, whom we labeled “cyberchondriacs,” have increased almost every year, reaching 110 million in 2002, and 160 million in 2007.

This year, the Harris Poll finds only 150 million who claim to have gone online to obtain healthcare information. Of course, 150 million is still a huge number and includes 66 percent of all adults and 81 percent of those who are online.

A word of caution is necessary. The difference between this year’s and last year’s survey results reflects two modest changes. A year ago we reported that 79 percent of all adults were online; this year’s survey finds that 76 percent are online. Last year, 84 percent of those online said they have ever looked for healthcare information online; this year’s survey finds 81 percent. Both of these small changes are within the possible sampling error for these surveys which could explain the difference.

However, it does appear that there has been no increase in the total number of people online or in the number of cyberchondriacs.

Other interesting findings of the nationwide Harris Poll of 1,010 U.S. adults surveyed by telephone by Harris Interactive between July 8 and 13, 2008 include:

- A quarter (25%) of those online go online for healthcare information often, virtually unchanged from last year (26%);
- On average, cyberchondriacs look for healthcare information online 4.8 times a month;
- The overwhelming majority of cyberchondriacs continue to believe that the information they obtain is reliable (86%) and report that they were successful (89%) in their search;
- Just under half (47%) of cyberchondriacs have discussed the information they obtained online with their doctors, and virtually half (49%) of cyberchondriacs have gone online to look for information as a result of discussions with their doctors.

## So What?

According to Humphrey Taylor, Chairman of *The Harris Poll*, “The rapid growth in the number of cyberchondriacs seems to have plateaued, but we do not know if this pause is temporary or more permanent. Influential experts have supported the widespread use of the Internet as a way to improve the quality of healthcare. This survey confirms that the Internet continues to be an important source of health care information for very large numbers of people, and most people trust the information they obtain and find it useful.”

As far as we know there are no objective measures of how accurate and reliable such online information actually is and some people have expressed concerns that it is sometimes unreliable. However, since many cyberchondriacs go online as a result of conversations with their doctors and discuss what they find with them, it seems that the Internet is positively contributing to the quality of healthcare.

**Table 1**  
**Cyberchondriacs: Trends 1998-2007**

Base: All U.S. adults

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

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

\*Based on July 2007 U.S. Census estimate released January 2008 (227,700,000 total U.S. adults aged 18 or over).

NA = Not Asked.

**Table 2**  
**Frequency of Accessing Health Information Online: 1998-2008**

“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
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Often	12	13	16	17	19	25	21	26	25
Sometimes	30	30	30	37	31	33	40	40	38
Hardly ever	29	31	30	23	24	14	19	18	17
Never	29	26	25	22	26	29	20	16	19
<b>Total who have looked for health or medical information sometimes or often (NET)</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>Total who have ever looked for health or medical information (NET)</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>81</b>

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: 2001-2008**

“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
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Not once	40	NA	21	14	23	26	25
<b>1 or more (NET)</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>75</b>
1 or 2 times	29	NA	26	31	35	30	31
3 – 5 times	17	NA	14	29	23	21	25
6 – 9 times	3	NA	5	6	5	8	5
10 or more times	9	NA	15	19	14	16	14
Not sure	2	NA	19	1	1	*	*
<b>Mean (average)</b>	<b>3.0</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>6.8</b>	<b>5.2</b>	<b>5.7</b>	<b>4.8</b>
<b>Median</b>	<b>1.1</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>2.0</b>	<b>3.0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>

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
	%	%	%	%
<b>SUCCESSFUL (NET)</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>89</b>
Very successful	46	42	37	41
Somewhat successful	43	46	50	48
Neither successful nor unsuccessful	2	4	5	3
<b>UNSUCCESSFUL (NET)</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>
Somewhat unsuccessful	3	4	3	2
Very unsuccessful	3	3	3	2
Not sure/Decline to answer	3	1	1	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
	%	%	%	%
<b>RELIABLE (NET)</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>86</b>
Very reliable	37	25	26	24
Somewhat reliable	53	61	60	62
Neither reliable nor unreliable	4	7	6	5
<b>UNRELIABLE (NET)</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>
Somewhat unreliable	3	5	6	4
Very unreliable	2	1	1	2
Not sure/Decline to answer	1	2	1	3

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
	%	%	%	%
<b>Yes (NET)</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>47</b>
Yes, always do	15	13	12	13
Yes, sometimes do	25	21	22	15
Yes, have done once or twice	18	19	24	19
No, never do	43	48	42	53
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
	%	%	%	%
<b>Yes (NET)</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>49</b>
Yes, often	17	14	17	12
Yes, sometimes	36	31	38	38
No, never	48	55	45	50
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 8 and 13, 2008 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 surveys are subject to several sources of error. These include: sampling error (because only a sample of a population is interviewed); measurement error due to question wording and/or question order, deliberately or unintentionally inaccurate responses, nonresponse (including refusals), interviewer effects (when live interviewers are used) and weighting.

With one exception (sampling error) the magnitude of the errors that result cannot be estimated. There is, therefore, no way to calculate a finite “margin of error” for any survey and the use of these words should be avoided.

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

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