

The internet and people's help-seeking behaviours

Background

Health information is widely available on the internet, and there is now a tendency to use information online before seeking advice from a GP (Hesse et al., 2005). This fact sheet reports on the use of the internet to find health information and attitudes towards the reliability of information on the internet.

Methodology

Respondents in the 2014 Health and Lifestyles Survey (HLS) were asked two questions on the use of the internet in relation to personal health concerns and issues. First, they were asked, 'When you have a health concern or issue, do you...': a) Look it up on the internet or Google; b) Go straight to your GP or nurse; c) Look it up on the internet or Google and then go and see your GP or nurse; d) Talk to family or friends; or e) Take no action. The response options were mutually exclusive. Second, they were asked for their agreement, on a five-point scale, with the statement, 'The internet delivers quality health information and accurate advice concerning health issues I might search for.' Daily internet use for an average day is also reported to give context to respondents' attitudes towards the internet on health concerns/issues.

Responses were compared by gender, age, ethnicity, neighbourhood deprivation status and educational background. Only those help-seeking behaviours that had greater than 10% response were analysed by subgroups. When looking at subgroup differences in help-seeking behaviours that involved using the internet, we have controlled for internet use status; this means that we take into account the status of a respondent's internet use to ensure that any differences found by subgroup (gender, age, ethnicity, neighbourhood deprivation status or educational background) are not due to differences in internet use status. When looking at differences by subgroups in agreement with the quality and accuracy of information on the internet, we have also controlled for internet use status.

Only those group differences that were statistically significant ($p < .05$) are reported.

Internet use

One in four (26%, 24-29%) respondents used the internet for less than one hour per day (self reported for an 'average day'), and three in ten (29%, 27-32%) used the internet for 1 – 2 hours per day (see Table 1). Three in ten (31%, 28-34%) respondents used the internet for three or more hours per day. Just over one in ten (13%, 12-15%) never used the internet. Information on internet use was then used in subsequent analyses.

Table 1: Time respondents spend on the internet on an average day (self reported)

Time spent on the internet on an average day (self reported) ^a	%	95% CI
Five hours or more per day	15	[12, 17]
3-4 hours per day	16	[14, 19]
1-2 hours per day	29	[27, 32]
Less than one hour per day/less often than once a day	26	[24, 29]
Never	13	[12, 15]

^a Time spent on the internet included browsing playing games, watching TV programmes and movies, listening to music, social media and online chat/instant messaging/Skype.

Note: Responses do not add to 100% due to rounding; 95% CI = 95% confidence interval.

Table 2: Help-seeking behaviour when a health concern or issue is present

Help-seeking behaviour	<i>n</i>	%	95% CI
Look it up on the internet or Google	244	11	[9, 12]
Go straight to your GP or nurse	1,514	52	[49, 55]
Look it up on the internet or Google and then go and see your GP or nurse	331	18	[15, 21]
Talk to family or friends	338	14	[12, 16]
Take no action	115	4	[3, 5]
Don't know/Refused	52	2	[1, 4]

Note: Responses do not add to 100% due to rounding; 95% CI = 95% confidence interval.

Help-seeking behaviour when health concern/issue is present

When faced with a health concern or issue, the majority of respondents (52%, 49-55%) reported that they go straight to their GP or nurse (Table 2). Twenty-nine percent (25-31%) reported either only using the internet or Google (11%, 9-12%), or using the internet or Google first and then seeing a GP or nurse (18%, 15-21%).

Internet/Google only

Respondents who reported that they look up their health concern or issue on the internet or Google only were more likely to be:

- 15 to 24 years old (21%), compared with 45 to 64 years old (8%) and over 65 years old (3%).

GP/nurse

Respondents who reported that they go straight to their GP or nurse were more likely to be:

- 45 to 64 years old (60%) and over 65 years old (79%), compared with 15 to 24 years old (30%)
- those with no formal qualification (66%) and trade certificate/professional/diploma (55%), compared to degree/postgraduate (41%).

Internet/Google first, then GP/nurse

Respondents who reported looking up a health concern or issue on the internet/Google first and then going to see a GP or nurse were more likely to be:

- female (21%), compared with male (14%)
- 25 to 44 years old (27%), compared with 15 to 24 years old (19%)
- European/Other (20%), compared with Māori (12%) and Asian (12%)
- those with a degree/postgraduate (30%), compared to those with no formal qualification (5%) and secondary school (18%).

Family or friends

Respondents who reported talking with family or friends were more likely to be:

- male (17%), compared with female (11%)
- 15 to 24 years old (26%), compared with 25 to 44 years old (15%), 45 to 64 years old (11%) and over 65 years old (7%)
- Māori (18%), compared with European/Other (13%).

Attitude towards quality and accuracy of health information from the internet

Three in ten (29%, 26-32%) respondents were in agreement with the statement *'The internet delivers quality health information and accurate advice concerning health issues I might search for'* (Figure 1). A further three in ten (31%, 28-34%) neither agreed nor disagreed, and approximately one in five (18%, 16-20%) didn't know.

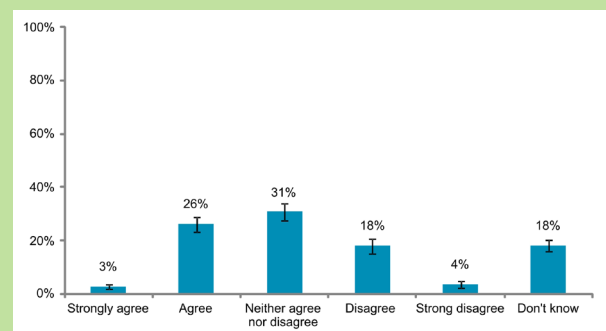


Figure 1: Level of agreement with the statement *'The internet delivers quality health information and accurate advice concerning health issues I might search for'*

Agreement with the statement increased with time spent on the internet. Compared with those who used the internet for less than one hour/day, respondents who used the internet for more than one hour/day were significantly more likely to be in agreement with the statement: 1-2 hours/day (OR=1.5); 3-4 hours/day (OR=1.6); and more than five hours/day (OR=1.9).

Respondents who were more likely to agree that the internet delivers quality health information and accurate advice (after adjusting for internet use) were:

- 15 to 24 years old (40%), compared with over 65 years old (13%)
- Pacific (35%), compared with European/Other (26%).

Key points

- When faced with a health concern/issue, the majority of respondents reported going straight to their GP or nurse.
- 29% of respondents reported using the internet to find health information; 11% only used the internet, and 18% used the internet first and then saw their GP or nurse.
- Help-seeking behaviour differed by gender, age, ethnicity and educational background.
- 29% of respondents agreed that the internet delivers quality health information and accurate advice.
- The more time respondents spent on average using the internet, the more likely they were to agree that accurate and quality health information could be found on the internet.

References

Hesse, B. W., Nelson, D. E., Kreps, G. L., Croyle, R. T., Arora, N. K., Rimer B. K. & Viswanath, K. (2005). Trust and sources of health information: The impact of the internet and its implications for health care providers: Findings from the first Health Information National Trends Survey. *JAMA Internal Medicine*, 165(22), 2618-2624.

Citation

Holland, K. (2015). *The internet and people's health seeking behaviours [In Fact]*. Wellington: Health Promotion Agency Research and Evaluation Unit.

About the Health and Lifestyles Survey

- The HLS is a nationwide in-home face-to-face survey conducted every two years since 2008.
- The 2014 HLS consisted of a sample of 2,594 New Zealanders aged 15 years and over, who provided information about their health behaviours and attitudes relating to tobacco, skin cancer prevention, healthy eating, gambling, alcohol, exercise, immunisation and mental health. The response rate was 73.2%.
- The 2014 HLS sample included 1,420 European/Other people, 564 Māori, 393 Pacific people and 217 Asian people (prioritised ethnicity).
- The data have been adjusted (weighted) according to 2013 Census data to ensure they are representative of the New Zealand population.
- For this analysis, jack-knife proportions and associated 95% confidence intervals were produced. Sub-group differences were tested using logistic regression. OR= odds ratio.
- Comparison groups for these analyses were as follows:
 - Gender (males, compared with females).
 - Age (25 to 44 years, 45 to 64 years and 65 + years, compared with 15 to 24 years).
 - Ethnicity (Māori, Pacific and Asian, compared with European/Other).
 - Neighbourhood deprivation status (mid and high deprivation levels, compared with low deprivation level).
 - Educational background (no formal qualification, secondary school and trade certificate/professional/diploma, compared with degree/postgraduate).
 - Internet use status (5+ hours/day, 3-4 hours/day, 1-2 hours/day, compared with <1 hour/day).
- A full description of the HLS methodology and further HLS publications can be found at <http://www.hpa.org.nz/research-library/research-publications>.

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April 2015

ISSN 2350-2991

