

January 2009

Web Replaces Doctors as Patients' Top Health Information Source

Written by Devon Herrick

A study by New York-based Manhattan Research has found people more frequently turn to the Internet for health information than seek information from their doctor. An estimated 145 million U.S. adults now turn to the Internet for information about diseases and other medical conditions.

According to Meredith Abreu Ressi, vice president of research at Manhattan Research, the Internet is a convenient way for patients to manage their health conditions independently.

“With health care costs skyrocketing, many consumers are replacing visits to their physician with information found online in health sites, communities, patient testimonials, and blogs,” said Ressi.

Surveys Agree

The Pew Internet & American Life Project estimates more than three-quarters of Internet users have searched for health information online. That is consistent with surveys from Harris Interactive, which found 81 percent of Internet users have done so.

Of patients recently diagnosed with a disease who seek health information online, nearly six in 10 (59 percent) report finding information there that led them to get a second opinion or raised new questions to

ask their doctors, according to Manhattan Research.

Pew speculates the relative convenience of the Internet may not be the only factor making it a preferred source for medical information. Accounts from numerous surveys point to the positive experiences patients have with online searches for health-related information. Nearly one-third (31 percent) of people who have sought health information online claim they themselves or people they know have been helped significantly by health information found online, the Pew survey found.

That figure is 10 times the percentage who claimed they or someone they know have been seriously harmed by following information obtained online.

Cost Savings

People often search for information about prescription drugs, according to the surveys, seeking more information about prescription therapies or ways to save money on drugs. Rxaminer.com, a Web-based tool developed by Joseph Rogers and operated by DestinationRx, helps patients identify lower-cost drugs that might serve as good substitutes for the ones they currently take.

“Comparing and shopping for prescription drugs is one of the easiest and most-

effective actions consumers can take to save on their health care costs,” said Toby Rogers, vice president for DestinationRx. The Web site also creates a report of lower-cost alternatives, making it easy to discuss them with one’s physician.

Always Available

Another possible reason Americans are surfing the Web for health content may be because they have a hard time getting their doctors on the phone. To answer the simplest questions, patients often must schedule an office visit well in advance, take time off from work, and queue in a crowded waiting room. That may be changing, the surveys show.

Gregory Couto, founder of the telemedicine firm AmeriDoc, says the future of medical consultations will increasingly involve

combining information technology with the ability to interact with a physician.

“Providing tools for patients to quickly connect with doctors reduces unnecessary trips to the doctor’s office; improves access to health care services for uninsured, underinsured, and rural Americans; and fundamentally changes health care services from reactive care to more proactive, preventive care,” Couto said.

AmeriDoc members can consult with a physician by way of telephone, but they also can follow up with a physician online through a secure, Web-based interface, Couto notes. In addition, “We feel that follow up email is critical,” Couto said.

The surveys confirm the Internet has already changed the way most patients get information on diseases and conditions, and Couto says it may soon change the way patients routinely interact with physicians.