



**Institute for Women's Health Research**

*Putting Women's Health First*

**June 2012**

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Dear Friends,

With the advent of the Internet and the multiple online health resources that are available and evolving, health information is more accessible than ever. Many women use online tools to understand their personal health from the comfort of their own homes, and employ social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to discuss health issues with others who can relate. Thus, the demand for up-to-date and reliable health information is quite high.

Thankfully, healthcare professionals are stepping up and providing such information to their patients and to the public through online resources. There are many ways to use the Internet as a tool for health information, and when used properly, the information available online has many educational and practical benefits. There is always potential to find inaccurate or misleading information, but with professionals as our guides, we can rely on much of the content to help us become proactive agents of our health.

Sincerely,

The Institute staff

## ONLINE HEALTH INFORMATION

### **Internet Use and Individual Health**

A woman in her mid-thirties suddenly begins experiencing night sweats. She talks to friends, who try to explain, "It's because you're a runner!" or "Try sleeping with the window open." She checks in with her primary care physician, who is unconcerned. She has no other discernable symptoms, but the periodic night sweats won't go away. She goes online to try to find an explanation and is barraged with terrifying possibilities: premature menopause, cancer, and neurologic dysfunction. Unwilling to give up, she continues her search and comes up with fibromyalgia, mononucleosis, and tuberculosis.

If you can relate to the scenario above, you are not alone. Today the average woman has more access to information at her fingertips than ever before. We can email our friend who knows a doctor, text our sister-in-law who is also pregnant, find an online message board for others suffering from the same illness, Google our symptoms, and read blogs about the latest health scare sweeping the nation. Online gathering of information about a health concern allows us to learn about as many or as few health-related issues as we would like, all just a few mouse clicks away. Thus, it is often difficult to navigate the seemingly endless (and often contradictory) maze of media.



Because of Facebook, Twitter, instant messaging and many other modes of communication, our social networks extend well beyond our physical neighbors, colleagues, and friends. We are able to access our peers easier than ever before. We can befriend women we have never met in

real life and commiserate over shared health woes, such as trying to get pregnant and dealing with menopause, two very common life events that unify women online, all from our home computers. Further, with the development of smartphones, we literally have the answers to a myriad of questions at our fingertips at any given moment. Of Internet users, 80% (59% of them U.S. adults) look online for health information, and 17% of cell phone users (or 15% of U.S. adults) access the Internet from their phone to look for health and/or medical information (1). With the development of health-related apps and smartphone-friendly websites, these percentages are quickly growing.

The Internet, for many people, is a one-stop resource for learning, teaching, self-monitoring, tracking, and sharing of information. Consider the following stats on peer-to-peer healthcare:

- 34% of Internet users (25% of U.S. adults) have read someone else's commentary or experience about health or medical issues on an online news group, website, or blog.
- 24% of Internet users (18% of adults) have consulted online reviews of particular drugs or medical treatments.
- 18% of Internet users (13% of adults) have gone online to find others who might have similar health concerns similar to theirs; people living with chronic and rare conditions are significantly more likely to do this.
- 27% of Internet users (20% of adults) have tracked their weight, diet, exercise routine or some other health indicators or symptoms online.
- 6% of Internet users (4% of adults) have posted comments, questions or information about health or medical issues on a website of any kind, such as a health site or news site that allows comments and discussion.
- 4% of Internet users (3% of adults) have posted their experiences with a particular drug or medical treatment (1).

### **Gender Differences in Seeking of Online Health Information**

Women are more likely than men to seek health information online (2). Recent research shows that compared to men, women search more health-related topics, seek more online support for medical issues through peer discussion and forum posts, and are more likely to search health-related issues on someone else's behalf. Women are also more likely than men to penetrate deeper into areas where they have the greatest interest, including health (3). Interestingly, women also tend to treat information gathering online differently than men. Many women view online inquiry as an interactive process characterized by gathering and exchanging information through groups, email correspondence, and

forum posts. Men gather information more efficiently and aggressively online, though, and the information they seek is often recreational, relating to sports, news, film, and hobbies.



Women are also more enthusiastic online communicators than men, and are more likely to use email to communicate with friends and family about a variety of topics. Women are more likely to feel satisfied with the role email plays in their lives, especially when it comes to nurturing their relationships. Additionally, women include a wider range of topics and

activities in their personal emails, while men use email more than women to communicate with various kinds of organizations (3). Thus, health-related information shared by women online might be more in-depth and thorough than that shared by men, and could potentially add to a more engaged experience of a woman's health related issues. Emails shared between women could also result in a great sense of encouragement to pursue care and to take control of personal health.

### **The Costs and Benefits of Online Health Information**

Is accessing health information online a good or a bad thing? It depends. There are many advantages including the ease of access to a wide array of information tailored to what one is looking for, social support (especially while experiencing an illness that might be very isolating), and anonymity (3). Disadvantages of using the Internet to find health information include inequality of access (for example, the language might be too technical, and those with lower incomes are less likely to own home computers or have Internet access), an overload of complicated or jargon-filled information, and questionable quality/reliability of sources such as misleading, false or out-of-date information (4). Still, the fear that people will self-diagnose using the Internet appears to be misguided. The Pew Internet & American Life Project reports that people still consider healthcare professionals (doctors, nurses, etc.) to be first choice for those with health concerns, but also states that online resources, including peer-to-peer online discourse, are still widely used for gathering health information.

### **The Internet, Social Media, and Patient Care**

Patients are not the only ones using the Internet and media for their health-related needs. Increasingly, clinics, hospitals and other healthcare facilities are using social media and online resources in care delivery and

patient correspondence. A Brooklyn-based primary care practice, Hello Health, has jumped on the opportunity to use such resources and have had positive feedback from patients. Media services include patient-doctor instant message correspondence and a social networking platform through which doctors can "friend" each other to share advice, network, or provide referrals.

There are, of course, risks and benefits to these additions to patient care. Some critics worry about privacy concerns due to social media fundamentally working via sharing of information and open (and often semi-public) correspondence. Further, as more patients and physicians join social networks, there may be potential for the information contained within correspondence to become diluted or misinterpreted, or evolve to become inaccurate. Additionally, online communication between patient and healthcare provider cannot replace in-person interaction, wherein patients can speak face-to-face with their doctor and do not have to deal with the limitations imposed by online discourse. Some low-income populations do not have access to computers or the Internet, and therefore those of low socioeconomic status may not enjoy the benefits that come with these novel resources.

### **The Future of Healthcare and the Internet**

Despite the pitfalls of the Internet's role in patient care, there are clear benefits. Social media increases accessibility of health-related information from professionals to patients, and clinics such as Hello Health are using media platforms already familiar to many Internet users. Social media can increase the sense of control a patient has over her or his healthcare and health information, which can encourage more in-depth understanding and interest in personal health decision making. The difficulty in initiating conversations around certain topics-sexual concerns, for instance-may be alleviated for those using the Internet to gather information or connect with others before bringing the conversation to a doctor.

While the use of the Internet for health reasons is still a relatively recent phenomenon, it is clear that as technology becomes more sophisticated and pervasive and as people become increasingly more tech-savvy, the possibilities for better health information and knowledge are endless.



Clinical use of web-based social media for patient-physician connections is already a reality and having a positive impact on women's health overall. Patients' use of social media continues to evolve and become more creative and accessible for those wishing to integrate healthcare and technology. As far as the content available on the Internet, there will always be a need for a critical eye from both the consumers and the authors. Luckily, more experts in women's health are participating in online conversations and supplying information that is scientifically sound and reliable, so we can take charge of our care and make the most informed decisions possible.

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#### References

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- (5) Fox, S. "The social life of health information." 2011.
- (6) Taylor, M. "Women outnumber men on social-networking sites." 2011.
- (7) Hawn, C. "Take Two Aspirin and Tweet Me in the Morning: How Twitter, Facebook, and Other Social Media are Reshaping Health Care." 2009.

## ONLINE HEALTH AND YOU

Please take a moment to complete this short quiz, and look for a breakdown of your answers in next month's newsletter!

<http://www.womenshealth.northwestern.edu/online-health-and-you>

## HEALTH TIP

The Institute for Women's Health Research offers a variety of online and social media health resources to keep you informed about the latest advances in women's health and Institute happenings. Check out the

following online resources we offer:

- [IWHR Main Site](#) and [Blog](#)
- [Oncofertility Consortium Main Site](#) and [Blog](#)
- [SaveMyFertility.org](#), a cancer and fertility preservation resource that includes [iSaveFertility](#), a free smartphone app available for download

## INSTITUTE HAPPENINGS

- Thanks to everyone who attended Women's Health Day on May 15th during National Women's Health Week. The event was a great success and we met many pioneers in the field of women's health, including Molly Carnes, who lectured on women's leadership in medicine. Lecture notes from her talk can be found [here](#).



- Looking for specialty women-specific clinics? Check out the list [here](#) of those who participated in the Women's Health Day event.
- Interested in research opportunities, or just want more information on the posters presented at Women's Health Day? Peruse the abstracts from the presenters [here](#).
- Teresa Woodruff, PhD will be a featured speaker at a TEDxNorthwesternU event on June 19 focusing on the *Complex World of Fertility*. Other speakers include Brian Uzzi, PhD, the co-director of the Northwestern Institute of Complex Systems, and Thomas O'Halloran, Director of the Chemistry of Life Sciences

Processes at NU. TEDx is a program of local, self-organized events that bring people together to share a TED-like experience. These local, self-organized events are branded TEDx, where x = independently organized TED event. For more information visit the TEDxNU [website](#). You can also watch it live at <http://tedx.northwestern.edu/webcast>.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

- The 5th National Conference on Behavioral Health for Women and Girls is July 17, 2012 (All day) through July 19, 2012 (All Day) at the San Diego Marriott Marquis and Marina. Click [here](#) for more information.
- The 2012 Oncofertility Consortium Conference, Dialogues in Oncofertility, will be held Wednesday, September 26 through Friday September 28, 2012. For information, click [here](#).

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