

Chapter 55

E-Health Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

E-health (eHealth) is an emerging field of health communication encompassing medical informatics, public health, and business where health information and services are exchanged through electronic processes. The current leading researchers in e-health include: Dr. Gunther Eysenbach from University of Toronto on health information and decision-making; Dr. David Gustafson from University of Wisconsin, Madison on interactive support systems; The Pew Internet and American Life Project on chronicling e-health use; Dr. Neil Coulson from University of Nottingham on online support group communication, and Dr. Elizabeth Murray from University College London, who develops online treatments. This entry summarizes research on e-health behaviors: seeking health information online, the impact of patient-to-patient communication on health, and receiving treatment online. Future directions for research on e-health behaviors include exploring the disadvantages of online support groups, research on minority populations, development of online randomized controlled trial methodology, and longitudinal research examining e-health behaviors over time.

INTRODUCTION

E-health (eHealth) “is the emerging field in the intersection of medical informatics, public health and business, referring to health services and information delivered or enhanced through the Internet and related technologies” (Eysenbach,

2001, p. e20). Eysenbach (2001) also indicates that this term is used to characterize a way of thinking, an attitude, or a commitment towards networked, global thinking that seeks to improve health care locally and beyond through the use of information and communication technology.

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OVERVIEW

The information and communication capabilities of cyber technologies have tremendous implications for health and well-being. There are a variety of online health-related resources such as web sites, bulletin and discussion boards, physician blogs, and sites that allow users to ask physicians a medical question (e.g., www.MDAdvice.com). The topics of these online forums are just as varied, and include those relevant to youth such as general adolescent concerns about puberty and sexual health and more specific topics such as sexually transmitted infection prevention, smoking cessation, suicide, mental health, and pro-anorexia sites. Cyber technologies can also be used within health care settings—for instance, email can be used to contact physicians and the Internet can be used for treatment delivery.

The term e-health was first used in 1999 (Mitchell, 2000) and is often associated with the term cybermedicine. It is used to describe service delivery and preventive care through consumer-driven applications that serve the larger general population (Della Mea, 2001; Eysenbach et al., 1999). E-patient is a commonly used term for consumers of e-health resources. Dr. Gunther Eysenbach (2001) highlights 10 aims and directions of the e-health field, such as enhancing the quality of patient care and encouraging patient and physician partnership in treatment.

Although health-related resources are easily accessible online, it appears that at the present time, e-patients comprise only a small subset of the larger population. Fox and Jones (2009) found that e-patients are typically White women with some college education or a baccalaureate degree who earn \$50,000 or more a year. Of the 61% of health information Internet users, approximately 28% used the Internet to search for mental health information (Fox & Jones, 2009). Eysenbach (2003) noted four primary activities that individuals engage in when using the Internet 1) content or information seeking, 2) community

(e.g., bulletin boards or chat rooms), 3) communication (e.g., email), and 4) e-commerce (e.g., purchasing or selling products on the Internet). One of the most common health-related behaviors online is searching for content related to health and medical issues (Atkinson, Saperstein, & Pleis, 2009; Fox & Rainie, 2000). In their survey of 500 Internet health seekers, Fox and Rainie (2002) found that users reported looking for health information online regarding a medical condition for someone they knew (81%), a diagnosis they had received (58%), when prescribed a new treatment or medication (56%), when dealing with a long-term medical condition (47%), to address unanswered questions after a physician's visit (47%), to make a change in exercise or diet habits (46%), or due to being a caregiver for someone (38%). These trends concerning usage behavior suggest that e-health applications may come to have a major impact on personal health behavior and decision-making.

Additionally, cost-saving pressures within the health system have led several healthcare companies to provide information via the web as a form of preventive care and to increase individuals' overall quality of life (Eysenbach & Diepgen, 2001). Ahern and colleagues posit that "eHealth is emerging as a promising vehicle to address the limited capacity of the health care system to provide health behavior change and chronic disease management interventions" (2006, p. e4). Electronic health information can be a powerful tool for prevention and patient education to meet today's demands in the healthcare industry for efficient and low-cost health treatments. Eysenbach and colleagues (1999) assert that the increase in e-health behaviors can help create an informed and empowered e-patient.

Research on e-health behavior has generally focused on the following health-related topics: seeking health information online, the nature and impact of patient-to-patient communication on health interactions, as well as the impact of receiving treatments online. This research suggests

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