

Early 50s may be key time to reach baby boomers with health messages

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For baby boomers, the peak interest in health issues comes at about age 51, with a second peak coming near age 65, according to a new study.

The results may help doctors and other professionals target this generation with [health messages](#) at a time when they are most receptive to hearing them, the researchers said.

The study, based on a survey of Americans age 45 to 65, showed that people in their late 40s had the lowest levels of interest in [health](#) issues. Interest rose quickly, however, and peaked in the early 50s, then dropped slightly and plateaued during the rest of the 50s and early 60s. Another rise in interest occurred near age 65.

This is the first study to find health-related "change points" during the [lifespan](#) when people perceive health needs to be more important than at other times, said John Dimmick, lead author of the study and emeritus associate professor of communication at Ohio State University.

Dimmick conducted the study with Katey Price, a [doctoral candidate](#) in communication at Ohio State, and Melanie Sarge, a former Ohio State doctoral student who is now an assistant professor at Texas Tech University.

"The early 50s are clearly a key change point for the [baby boomers](#) we studied," Price said.

"This would be a great time to reach boomers with messages about how to improve and protect their health."

Price presented their results Nov. 15 in Orlando at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association.

The researchers suspect interest in health peaks in the early 50s because of what doctors and the media tell people reaching that age.

"Fifty is the age Americans are told they need to undergo a variety of health screenings," Dimmick said. For example, people are often told that they should get a [colonoscopy](#), mammogram and—until recently—a [PSA test](#) for [prostate cancer](#) when they turn 50.

"People start really paying attention to their health when they are encouraged to get all of these various [screening tests](#)."

Dimmick said the study was conducted to better target media health campaigns to boomers as well as to assist medical professionals to better target [health information](#) to this generation.

The study involved 477 respondents from across the country who completed an online questionnaire. They were recruited by a commercial sampling and survey firm.

Respondents rated how important they thought each of 18 health issues were to them on a seven-point scale from "not at all important" to "very important." The health issues included diabetes, cancer, heart disease, arthritis, and nutrition and weight management.

Respondents were also asked where they got their health information, how often they used the media, and how they would rate their overall health.

The researchers examined how respondents of different ages ranked the importance of the 18 health issues to determine change points when health took on a higher priority among these baby boomers.

Dimmick noted that the change points were not affected by gender, media use or how respondents rated their own health.

"These change points seem to be affecting nearly everyone in our sample," he said.

While 51 was when health interest was at its highest, another peak came near age 65, the study found. That peak probably comes as baby boomers are contemplating retirement.

"Age 65 is when people traditionally are thought of as senior citizens," Price said. "Old age is synonymous with declining health in our culture, so people again start thinking they should be worried about their health."

Price and Dimmick both noted that they couldn't find any medical reason for people's interest in health to peak at about age 50 and again at age 65.

"We do a lot of health screenings at age 50 and prepare for retirement at age 65 and that seems to drive a lot of the interest in health issues at those ages, Dimmick said."

With interest in health peaking at those two points, it was not surprising that the participants' use of health media also peaked at [age](#) 51 and then again at 64.

Overall, the respondents reported that health professionals were their number one source of health information, with the media—particularly the internet—coming in second.

"The internet is the key to delivering health information to baby boomers," Dimmick said. "In order to effectively reach baby boomers, we need to have websites designed to furnish information on the health issues rated most important by boomers."

Of the 18 health issues included in the study, seven were rated relatively high in importance by the respondents: eyes, diabetes, cancer, heart disease, nutrition/weight management, arthritis, and high blood pressure.

"These are the issues health professionals should concentrate on, because they are what baby boomers are most interested in themselves," Dimmick said.

Boomers rated the other 11 health issues as relatively less important: Parkinson's disease, blood poisoning, flu, dementia/Alzheimer's, respiratory disease, hearing problems, mental health, brain disease, pneumonia, kidney disease, and liver disease.

While these 11 [health issues](#) are important, Dimmick said the results suggest these aren't the issues that should be highlighted.

"If you're going to change people's behavior, first you have to concentrate on what people think is most important," Dimmick said. "Then you can worry about the other issues."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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