Medical Xpress

Internet can combat cancer confusion, study finds

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Some think pursuing information on WebMD just fuels one's inner hypochondriac, but when it comes to cancer, could Internet research actually make us healthier?

Inundated with reports about [cancer](#) causes and prevalence, many people have adopted fatalistic attitudes about its prevention, believing that getting cancer is a matter of fate or luck. But a new study has found that the Internet can be used as a tool to help clarify cancer confusion and promote prevention practices.

"We were surprised. In the age of WebMD and 'Dr. [Google](#),' we were concerned about the potential for the Internet to widen gaps in knowledge and behaviors to prevent cancer," said Cornell Assistant Professor of Communication Jeff Niederdeppe, who co-authored the report with Chul-joo Lee, assistant professor of communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Derek Freres, a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania.

"Some websites contain inaccurate and incomplete information, posted without editorial review, which could add to levels of confusion and a sense that everything causes cancer," Niederdeppe said. "We were also concerned that the ability to jump quickly from one snippet of information to another via links could lead to information overload."

But Niederdeppe, Lee and Freres found that such interlinked, integrated information can actually promote learning. In a survey of nearly 2,000

U.S. adults, aged 40 to 70, they found that those who sought health information on the Internet were more likely to have positive beliefs about [cancer prevention](#).

Moreover, the effect was strongest for those with low levels of formal education, suggesting that the Internet has potential to be a powerful tool to reduce inequalities in cancer knowledge and prevention behaviors, the authors said.

This is important because those with positive outlooks are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors that could help prevent cancer, such as eating fruits and vegetables and getting screened for cancer, Niederdeppe said.

"Reducing cancer fatalism, especially among people with low socioeconomic status, is arguably one of the most important public health goals in the nation," Lee said.

In previous studies, Niederdeppe and Lee showed that frequent exposure to short reports about cancer in the media, particularly via local television, can increase cancer fatalism over time.

In another recent study, Niederdeppe found that newspaper coverage that includes information about how to avert the threats can help reduce feelings of information overload. But there is much left to learn.

"There are still large gaps in cancer-related knowledge between socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged populations. Access and use of the Internet aren't magic bullets that are going solve these issues, but there is considerable potential to use the Web to reduce harmful beliefs about cancer's causes and prevention," Niederdeppe said.

The Internet cancer fatalism study appeared in the December issue of

the *Journal of Communication*.

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