

Quality of health-related Internet searches varies, study finds

April 9 2014, by Milenko Martinovich

(Medical Xpress)—If you're like most people, you've gone online to find out what's causing that ringing in your ears or whether a gluten-free diet is worth considering. Be careful.

University of Florida researchers have found that, as with so much on the Internet, the quality of the information you dig up may depend on what you ask for and the results could be hazardous to your [health](#).

The researchers discovered that Web searches related to the diagnosis and treatment of physical disease or injuries tend to yield higher-quality information than online searches for preventive health and social health information. The findings appeared in the January issue of the journal Decision Support Systems.

A search for the word "health" returned first-page results from well-respected [health care providers](#), for example, while a search for "newborn vaccines" yielded hits for blogs and forums that discuss delaying or refusing medically recommended vaccinations. So when it comes to health information, [search results](#) may vary.

"Based on these results, health consumers and patients may feel assured that they can find some high-quality health information when using a [search engine](#)," said study co-author Christopher A. Harle, an assistant professor of health services research, management and policy at the UF College of Public Health and Health Professions. "However, consumers and patients should know that searches for some health topics, such as

nutrition or fitness, may result in more information that is potentially lower quality."

More than 60 percent of American adults look for health information online, and six out of 10 people in this group report that their most recent search influenced their health-related decisions, according to research from the Pew Research Center.

About 65 percent of people seeking health information use a search engine to start their inquiry, compared with one-quarter of Web users who begin their search at a health-related website. The ranking of [search engine results](#) is important, because users tend to gravitate to results listed on the first page of a search, UF researchers say. Consumers may be more likely to find erroneous information if search engines rank lower-quality websites higher.

"Inaccurate or misleading results could lead people to ignore important symptoms and delay or even refuse recommended health care," said Brent Kitchens, the study's lead author and a doctoral candidate at the UF Warrington College of Business Administration's department of information systems and operations management. "Low-quality results could also lead people to seek unnecessary health care or implement unproven or potentially harmful at-home treatments."

For the UF study, the researchers queried Google's general search engine using more than 2,000 different health-related terms. To determine the quality of websites returned in the first page of search results, the researchers checked to see if the sites were certified for accuracy by the nonprofit Health on the Net Foundation or were included in Medline Plus, a consumer website run by the National Institutes of Health.

Although the study found that more than half of the websites returned by popular search engines are of a high quality, the researchers stress that

more can be done to improve an online user's experience. They suggest that existing online resources be examined for quality, and that health care and government organizations disseminate more high-quality information on topics where accurate information is lacking.

"Based on these results, [health care](#) providers may feel more confident that patients can find good health information on the Internet," Harle said. "So, rather than recommending patients avoid Internet searches for [health information](#), providers may consider helping patients develop good strategies for recognizing high-quality information over questionable information."

Provided by University of Florida

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