

Educated consumers more likely to use potentially unreliable online healthcare information

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The last time you experienced worrisome medical symptoms, did you look for advice online before consulting a health-care professional? If so, you're not alone. Consumers are increasingly turning to forums, video-sharing sites, and peer support groups to gather anecdotal information and advice, which may distract them from more reliable and trustworthy sources. New research to be presented at the HFES 2014 Annual Meeting in Chicago studies the characteristics of consumers who use the Internet to collect health-care information.

"Age, educational levels, and [health status](#) were significant predictors of a consumer's use of anecdotal information available on the Internet," said Kapil Chalil Madathil, a research assistant professor at Clemson University's Department of Industrial Engineering and one of the coauthors of "An Investigation of the Factors That Predict a Healthcare Consumer's Use of Anecdotal Information Available on the Internet."

In assessing the factors that influence a person's likelihood to seek health-care information online, Chalil Madathil and coauthors Dr. Joel Greenstein and Reshmi Koikkara found that among more than 3,000 participants, younger [consumers](#) who attended four or more years of college were far more likely to reference online anecdotal information than were older individuals with a [high school education](#) or less. Additionally, respondents who reported poorer levels of health take to the Internet significantly more often than do those who are healthier.

The authors urge consumers to seek advice from a licensed medical professional and to use caution when searching for [health information](#) online.

"Consumers may be relying less on health-care providers, which creates the risk of receiving misleading, inaccurate, and untrustworthy information from unmoderated Internet sources," said Chalil Madathil. "It's critical for them to develop skills for accessing, comprehending, and effectively using this information. "

Provided by Human Factors and Ergonomics Society

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