

# Better-educated people more open to dubious health info on web, study finds

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Also more likely to trust non-professional advice from social media, video sharing, researchers say.

(HealthDay)—Younger college graduates are more likely to trust health information from questionable sources on the Internet than older high school grads would, new research reports.

Researchers say many people have learned to rely less on [health care providers](#) and more on highly accessible content freely available through mobile phones, tablets and computers.

The new study found that younger adults who attended at least four years of college were far more likely to seek anecdotal online health information about a health problem from non-experts than were older people who had no more than a [high school education](#).

Those most comfortable using computers to gather information and with

the greatest access to computers and mobile technology are tapping the Internet for answers to their questions about minor and major [health problems](#), said Kapil Chalil Madathil, the lead study author and assistant professor in the department of engineering at Clemson University, in South Carolina.

"These people go online and turn to video-sharing sites and peer support groups to get information and advice, which may not be accurate or reliable," Chalil Madathil added.

Even those who are college-educated seem to be turned off by statistical analyses or complicated explanations, such as government quality reporting sites that list long columns of numbers that don't make sense to most people, added Chalil Madathil.

"Most people would rather read a narrative or a story, or look at information graphics, than try to compare and contrast different numbers about something like 20 quality measures of a hospital," he said.

The study also found that women, more than men, and people with health issues were most likely to seek so-called anecdotal information online.

The research also showed that as people get older, they become less likely to look for health information in social media, peer [support groups](#) and video-sharing sites like YouTube.

The research is to be presented Oct. 28 at the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society annual meeting in Chicago. Data and conclusions from the study should be viewed as preliminary until published in a peer-reviewed journal.

For the study, Chalil Madathil and his team analyzed data from about 3,000 people who participated in the Pew Internet & American Life Health Tracking Survey in 2012. The survey involved interviews on how people used the Internet to find [health information](#). The researchers only included those who indicated they went online occasionally or frequently.

Participants were asked if they had consulted online rankings or reviews of hospitals or other medical facilities, consulted online rankings or reviews of doctors or other providers, or read someone's commentary on or experience with health or medical issues online.

One expert not involved in the study said there may be good reasons why people search online for health info.

"Physicians have less and less time to spend with patients, so people are going to look for information, explanations and emotional support from other sources," said Jennifer Reich, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Colorado Denver.

Other research has shown that education can play a role in turning people away from traditional health experts, she added. Reich said she recently published research that showed that more educated and higher income parents said they had the time, knowledge and resources to reject public health recommendations, like getting their children vaccinated.

"Those who refuse vaccines for their children often see themselves as experts about their own children, trusting their own personal research," she said.

Reich also questioned whether the increased use of the Internet by younger adults represented higher levels of comfort with technology, or whether it suggested that newer college graduate may be more

questioning of expertise.

"Older people are more reverent to physicians and less likely to question them," she noted.

It's possible that people with more education are simply more confident in their own ability to tease out fact from fiction, she added, noting, "We expect people now to be responsible for their own health, but that also means they want to claim the authority to make their own decisions."

Reich encourages [health](#) providers to refrain from treating those who search online for information as ill-informed. "It's really easy to dismiss them as if they just don't get it, but these people spend a lot of time researching question," she said. "While they may interpret information differently, it's not that they didn't understand the information."

**More information:** Learn more about evaluating health information online and in the media from the [U.S. National Library of Medicine](#).

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