

Teens turn to Internet to cope with health challenges

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Credit: Petr Kratochvil/public domain

At a time when teenagers are grappling with new and often confusing health concerns, the overwhelming majority—84 percent—turn to the Internet, according to the first national study in more than a decade to examine how adolescents use digital tools for health information.

But while most teens tap online sources to learn more about puberty,

drugs, sex, depression and other issues, a surprising 88 percent said they do not feel comfortable sharing their [health concerns](#) with Facebook friends or on other [social networking sites](#), according to the study by Northwestern University researchers.

The report yields important information for [public health organizations](#) trying to reach adolescents. Nearly one third of the teenagers surveyed said the online information led to behavior changes, such as cutting back on soda, trying healthier recipes and using exercise to combat depression. One in five teens surveyed, or 21 percent, meanwhile, have downloaded mobile health apps.

"We found some real surprises about what teens are doing online when it comes to their health," said Ellen Wartella, director of Northwestern's Center on Media and Human Development and lead author of the report.

"We often hear about all the negative things kids are doing online, but teens are using the Internet to take care of themselves and others around them," said Wartella, the Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani Professor in Communication in Northwestern's School of Communication.

"The new study underscores how important it is to make sure there is accurate, appropriate and easily accessible information available to teens, because it's used and acted upon."

The Northwestern study, "Teens, Health & Technology," surveyed 1,156 American teenagers between 13 and 18 years old. It will be released June 2 at a Northwestern policy conference in Washington, D.C.

The researchers explored how often teens use online health tools, how much information they receive, what topics they are most concerned with, how satisfied they are with the information, what sources they trust and whether they have changed their health behaviors as a result.

"The Internet is clearly empowering teens to protect their health," said Vicky Rideout, head of VJR Consulting and a co-author of the report. "But we need to make sure they are equipped with the digital literacy skills to successfully navigate this online landscape."

Additional report findings include:

- **Parents still rule:** While the Internet is the most popular media source for [health information](#), teens say they get the majority of health information from mom and dad. The study found 55 percent say they get "a lot" of health info from parents, followed by health classes at school (32 percent) and medical providers (29 percent). Overall the Internet ranks fourth (25 percent) as a source of "a lot" of health information. Only a very small number of teens—13 percent—say they go online to research topics they are uncomfortable talking with their parents about.
- **Youth digital and health divide:** More than half (52 percent) of lower-income teens (those from families earning less than \$25,000 a year) said a family member had encountered a serious health issue in the past year, compared to 27 percent of higher-income teens (more than \$75,000/year). But lower-income teens are least likely to have had a health class at school (44 percent vs. 60 percent of high-income teens) or to have access to [digital tools](#) such as a laptop (32 percent vs. 58 percent), smartphone (44 percent vs. 69 percent) or tablet (26 percent vs. 42 percent).
- **Beyond medical websites:** Nearly a third of teens (31 percent) visit medical websites for health information, but other, less-traditional sources include YouTube (20 percent), Yahoo (11 percent), Facebook (9 percent) and Twitter (4 percent).
- **Top four reasons teens search for health info:** School assignments (53 percent), to take better care of themselves (45 percent), check symptoms or diagnose (33 percent) or find info for family or friends (27 percent).

- Fitness and nutrition top researched issues: Forty-two percent of teens have researched fitness/exercise, followed by diet/nutrition (36 percent), stress and anxiety (19 percent), sexually transmitted diseases (18 percent), puberty (18 percent), depression (16 percent) and sleep (16 percent).
- Behavior change: Nearly one in three teens (32 percent) say they have changed their behavior due to digital health information or tools. Almost of all these (28 percent) report a change due to online health information, with 7 percent saying they've changed their behavior as a result of their use of a mobile app.
- Privacy concerns: More than two-thirds (69 percent) say they are concerned that websites might sell or give away information about what they do online and 70 percent either somewhat or strongly disagree with companies directing ads to them based on their searches.
- "Negative" health information fairly infrequent: Many teens come across negative health information online including drinking games (27 percent), getting tobacco or other nicotine products (25 percent), how to be anorexic or bulimic (17 percent) and how to get or make illegal drugs (14 percent). But most say they see this information infrequently. Only 4 percent of teens said they see such info "often," 14 percent "sometimes" and 23 percent just "once or twice."
- Quick clicks: Half of [teens](#) say they usually click on the first site that comes up. Still domain names seem to matter; only 14 percent say they trust a dot-com domain "a lot" compared to 37 percent for a dot-edu domain. Interestingly, just eight percent say they use sites designed specifically for people their age.

Provided by Northwestern University

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