

Doctor Google: How age and other factors influence online health information searches

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Consumers have access to multiple Web sites to search for online health information and can be far more involved in managing their own medical issues than ever before. However, this wealth of resources can make finding accurate information difficult, especially because it is often spread across multiple sites. A new study published in the *Journal of Cognitive Engineering and Decision Making* aims to evaluate the types of search strategies that Internet users adopt when trying to solve a complicated health problem.

Joseph Sharit, a professor in the Department of Industrial Engineering at the University of Miami, says, "This type of sustained online information-seeking can be more cognitively taxing for users than simple search tasks because one must find, filter, comprehend, and integrate health information that is often distributed across multiple sources."

In "Online Information Search Performance and Search Strategies in a Health Problem-Solving Scenario," Sharit and fellow human factors researchers Jessica Taha, Ronald Berkowsky, Halley Profita, and Sara Czaja asked 60 adults between the ages of 18 and 85 to complete cognitive ability tests that measured skills such as processing time, reasoning ability, and executive function. Participants were then asked to use the Internet to research and answer a series of questions related to a complex health information problem. Their responses were evaluated based on age, Internet experience, and cognitive test results.

The researchers found that younger participants and those who scored higher on the cognitive tests were more likely to use an analytical approach by manipulating key words in search engines until they achieved the desired results. Although older participants took longer to complete their tasks, their searches were more efficient and their responses were just as accurate as those of the younger respondents.

"Despite the increasing power of search engines, we should not underestimate how difficult health-related problem solving using the Internet can be for many individuals," adds Sharit. "Characterizing how people perform these [search](#) activities and what makes them successful at it provides important insights. Also, consideration should be given to new ways of supporting consumers of [health information](#), especially older adults, who are susceptible to normal age-related declines in cognitive abilities."

Provided by Human Factors and Ergonomics Society

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