

# Low rate of Internet use by seniors for health purposes

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In a study appearing in the August 2 issue of *JAMA*, David M. Levine, M.D., M.A., of Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, and colleagues examined trends in seniors' use of digital health technology in the U.S. from 2011-2014.

The sickest, most expensive, and fastest growing segment of the U.S. population are [seniors](#) 65 years and older. Digital health technology has been advocated as a solution to improve [health care quality](#), cost, and safety. However, little is known about digital health use among seniors. For this study, the researchers analyzed results from the National Health and Aging Trends Study (NHATS), a nationally representative survey of community-dwelling Medicare beneficiaries 65 years and older. Each year, NHATS asks the same respondents about every day (nonhealth) technology use and 4 digital health modalities: use of the internet to fill prescriptions, contact a clinician, address insurance matters, and research health conditions. This study included participants in 2011 who were followed yearly until 2014.

In 2011, the average age of the 7,609 participants was 75 years; 57 percent were women. Although 76 percent of seniors used cell phones and 64 percent computers, fewer used internet (43 percent) and email and texting (40 percent). Less than 20 percent used internet banking, internet shopping, social network sites (2013 data), and tablets (2013 data). Fewer seniors used digital health technology: 16 percent obtained health information, 8 percent filled prescriptions, 7 percent contacted clinicians, and 5 percent handled insurance online. In 2011, variables

associated with less use of any digital health were older age; black, Latino, and other race/ethnicity; divorce; and poor health. By 2014, although cell phone and computer use were stable, small statistically significant increases were noted in other every day technologies. Use of 3 of 4 digital health technologies increased. The proportion of seniors who used any digital health increased from 21 percent in 2011 to 25 percent in 2014.

"Digital health is not reaching most seniors and is associated with socioeconomic disparities, raising concern about its ability to improve quality, cost, and safety of their health care. Future innovations should focus on usability, adherence, and scalability to improve the reach and effectiveness of digital health for seniors," the authors write.

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