

Chronically ill women underusing online self-care resources, study shows

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Barriers to internet use may be preventing chronically ill middle-aged and older women from being as healthy as they otherwise could be, new research from Oregon State University suggests.

The study conducted by researchers from the OSU College of Public Health and Human Sciences and the University of Georgia analyzed data from hundreds of women age 44 and older with at least one chronic condition and found that 35 percent of them didn't use the [internet](#) at all. Among those who did, fewer than half used it to learn from the experiences of other chronic-disease patients; fewer than 20 percent took part in online discussions regarding their conditions.

Self-care, including the use of online resources, is an important component in managing chronic illnesses such as heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, arthritis, asthma, [high blood pressure](#), emphysema, chronic bronchitis, depression and anxiety. Effective management of these types of conditions delays or prevents them from becoming debilitating, maintaining quality of life for the patient and saving health care dollars.

The research showed the potential for improved condition management by getting online resources into the hands of more patients.

"We want people to be able to optimize their health," said researcher Carolyn Mendez-Luck, an assistant professor in the School of Social and Behavioral Health Sciences at OSU.

Among the 418 women participating in the study, internet use for self-care varied depending on factors that included age, the specific condition or conditions a patient had, education level and ethnic background.

"It really seemed to be the lower-resourced individuals who weren't using the internet and thus online resources," Mendez-Luck said. "If you're older, if you're a member of a minority group, if you're less educated, if you're not working, all of those things work against you and impede your use of the internet; that's what this research suggests."

The women in the study all completed, via telephone, the National Council on Aging Chronic Care Survey and all had one or more chronic conditions. Support for the research also came from Atlantic Philanthropies, the California Healthcare Foundation, and the Center for Community Health Development. Results were recently published in the *Journal of Women's Health*.

The study featured two parts. The first analyzed data in terms of sociodemographics, disease types and healthcare management associated with internet use, and the second focused on the 251 internet-using women to identify the online self-care resources they use and for what purposes.

About 31 percent of the women in the study were 65 and older; 30 percent had three or more chronic conditions; and 65 percent said they used the internet.

"A significantly larger proportion of older women reported multiple chronic conditions, and a significantly smaller proportion of older women reported using the internet or relying on it for help or support," Mendez-Luck said. "A significantly larger proportion of non-internet users reported needing help learning what to do to manage their health

conditions and needing help learning how to care for their health conditions."

Mendez-Luck says understanding how women with chronic conditions use the internet, or why they don't, can inform targeted efforts to increase internet availability, to educate patients about online resources, and to tailor internet-based materials to self-care needs. Women tend to live longer than men and also tend to be particularly affected by chronic diseases.

"The number of people living with chronic conditions for longer durations is growing," Mendez-Luck said. "Complex patients, especially individuals with multiple chronic conditions, present enormous challenges to healthcare providers and a significant financial burden to the healthcare system. This situation is likely to become more critical as the number of Americans living to advanced ages increases in the next few decades."

Self-care behaviors are important in managing chronic disease, Mendez-Luck noted. Without effective management, chronic conditions can diminish individuals' capacity to care for themselves as well as thwart caregivers' efforts.

"We discovered that a significantly larger proportion of internet-using women with diabetes and depression reported needing help in both learning what to do to manage their health conditions and how to better care for their health, compared with women with other [health conditions](#)," Mendez-Luck said. "This finding highlights the notion that internet resources are not a one size fits all situation; it really does depend on the condition."

Older women represent the [chronic-conditions](#) group with the most potential for gains in using [online resources](#) for disease self-

management.

"There's an opportunity for sure," Mendez-Luck said, noting that one method for improvement might be as simple as a physician, nurse or dietitian taking a moment to talk to patients about using the internet and how it can benefit them.

"The fact that older women in general use the internet at lower rates, I think that's not surprising," Mendez-Luck said. "We need to give them a chance to get connected to community resources like libraries and senior centers that try to do education to dispel that fear or discomfort [older women](#) might have regarding technology. And more research needs to be done to determine how to tailor that online information in a way that meets their needs."

More information: Amanda J. Pettus et al, Internet-Based Resources for Disease Self-Care Among Middle-Aged and Older Women with Chronic Conditions, *Journal of Women's Health* (2016). [DOI: 10.1089/jwh.2016.5843](#)

Provided by Oregon State University

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