



Online Consumer Health Information

Health Consumers Flock to the Internet

MEDLINEplus Internet queries increasing

- 53,000 visitors in 1st quarter, 1998
- 5 1/2 *million* per month 2004!
- Consumers viewing 52 *million* pages

Source: MedlinePlus @ <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/news/medplus6yrs.html>

Harris Poll: Online Health Care Information

- 51% of all adults (111 *million* people) sought health information online in 2004
- 74% of those online have looked for health information at some time
- 60% have gone online for health information in the last month.
- 51% of people who look for health care information on the internet use a search engine
- 23% go to a health specific site
- 14% go to a specific site with a health care section

Source: Harris Poll: No Significant Change in the Number of “Cyberchondriacs –Those Who Go Online for Health Care Information, *Healthcare News*, Vol. 4, Issue 7 (April 12, 2004). Available: http://www.harrisinteractive.com/news/newsletters/healthnews/HI_HealthCareNews2004Vol4_Iss07.pdf

Reasons for Increasing Consumer Health Information Demand

1. Mobility of population
2. Managed Care
3. Fitness lifestyle
4. Patient Activism
5. Medicine in the news
6. Advances in biotechnology and genetics

Source: Gillaspay, Mary L. Starting a consumer health information service in a public library. *Public Library Quarterly*. v. 18 no. 3/4 (2000) p. 5-19

Pew Internet & American Life Project

- 72% of health seekers say you can believe all or most of the health information online.
- Sixty-nine percent stated that they had not found “wrong” or “misleading health info” online
- Only 28% noted finding “bad” information



- “In reality, most health seekers go online without a definite research plan. The typical health seeker starts at a search site, not a medical site, and visits two to five sites during an average visit.”
- “About one third of health seekers who find relevant information online bring it to their doctor for a final quality check.”

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project: “Vital Decisions: How Internet Users Decide What Information to Trust When They or Their Loved Ones Are Sick.” May 22, 2002. Available: <http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=59> .

Healthcare Information Delivery

In a study of 350 Michigan public libraries:

- Alternative medicine questions increased by 53.4%
- Six of ten health information reference problems involved librarian training in reference interview techniques, ethics, source, use, or referral procedures
- Difficulty understanding patron queries was cited as the most common problem

Source: Spang, L. and Baker L.M. Healthcare information delivery in public libraries: implications for academic reference librarians. *Reference Services Review*. 2000 v28 no.1 pp81-94.

Top 10 Health Information Reference Problems Cited by Public Libraries

1. Difficulty understanding what person wants to know
2. Most useful material not owned by the library
3. Language in source too difficult for librarian and patron
4. Insufficient librarian and patron knowledge to determine useful source
5. Unsure how to evaluate conflicting sources
6. Risk in giving wrong information, advice or interpretation
7. Materials missing from the collection
8. Unsure of referral procedure to health professional/agency
9. Useful sources not yet published
10. Inadequate training to use in house sources.

Other findings:

- 90% of public librarians experience with health information reference questions came from on the job training.
- "Patrons whose queries could not be understood by the librarian or be answered in the library by means of at hand resources (print or electronic) or through sources readily available via interloan were seldom referred to healthcare or health system specialists."

Source: Spang, Lothar and Baker, Lynda M. Healthcare information delivery in public libraries: implications for academic reference librarians. *Reference Services Review*. v.28 no. 1 (2000) p.81-94.



How Consumers Search for and Appraise Online Health Information

- Eysenbach and Köhler documented the search patterns of 21 individuals seeking health information on the Internet. Participants ranged from nurses to lay people without any formal medical experience or training.
- “None of the participants used medical portals or the sites of medical societies or libraries as a starting point.”
- Individuals started from a variety of search engines.
- Just 35% (99 out of 280) search queries by the participants used more than one term.
- One person (out of 21) used the Boolean operator (combining term) “AND”
- 3.5% (10) of the 280 searches included a phrase or group of words put in quotation marks, indicating that the words should appear together within the retrieved document.
- Seekers spent about five minutes and 42 seconds on each question before they felt that they had located “quality” answers.
- Seekers only reviewed the first few links on the general search engine results pages.
- Not a single participant “checked ‘about us’ sections of Web sites, disclaimers, or disclosure statements.”
- During the post-search interviews, “very few participants had noticed and remembered which Web sites they had retrieved information from.”

Source: Eysenbach, G., and Köhler, C. “How Do Consumers Search for and Appraise Health Information on the World Wide Web? Qualitative Study Using Focus Groups, Usability Tests, and In-Depth Interviews.” *BMJ* 324(March 9, 2002): 573-6.

Evaluating Health Information on the Internet

When evaluating information, consider:

- Authorship/Authority
- Bias
- Content/Scope
- Currency
- Ease of Use
- Level
- Purpose
- Reliability/Accuracy
- Uniqueness

Questions to ask about Consumer Health Information Web Sites

1. Who runs the Web site?
2. Who pays for the Web site?
3. What is the purpose of the Web site?
4. What is the original source of information?
5. How is information reviewed and selected for the Web site?
6. How is information documented?
7. How current is the information?
8. How does the Web site choose links to other sites?
9. What information about users does the Web site collect, and why?
10. How easy is the Web site to use?