

Who Utilizes the Internet for Medical-Related Problems? A National Study from Taiwan

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The Internet has changed our lives significantly. If used properly, it can be a great force to promote health and enhance medical knowledge (Baker, Wagner, Singer, & Bundorf, 2003; Cotton, 2001). The purpose of this study is to describe those who utilize the Internet for health-related issues. Specifically, how individual characteristics affect health-related Internet usage among Taiwanese adults.

While research on seeking health-information is flourishing in the US and in Europe, less research has been done in Asia. One Japanese study has explored a similar issue: the tools consumers use to go online for health-related information (Takahashi et al., 2011). Little is known about how sociodemographic characteristics, and mental and physical health status, affect health-related Internet usage. The results of this study will help to profile those who utilize Internet for health-related issues.

In this study, the 2009 National Health Interview Survey in Taiwan was used. This survey applied a multistage, stratified, and random sampling during 2009 with a total of 25,636 cases. The questions of interest were asked on a sub-sample of the study which included 2,763 participants. Logistic regression was used to explore the relationship between demographic characteristics and mental and physical health with utilization of the Internet for health-related information.

After controlling for demographic characteristics, one additional increase in disease was related to a 14% increase in the likelihood to obtain online information. Those who reported poorer health was related to 5% decrease in the likelihood to obtain online health information. Those who had higher mental health scores had higher odds of obtaining online medical resources. A one point increase in the mental health score was related to a 2% increase in the likelihood to utilize online health information. Men, individuals who were younger than 24 or older than 44, individuals who had lower education and individuals with lower household income had lower odds to obtain (utilize) online medical resources.

Similar to the results found in other countries, women, individuals who were between 24-44 years old, individuals who were higher educated, and individuals who had higher income were more likely to go online for health-related information. This study also demonstrated that those who reported having poorer physical health were more likely to utilize online health information. Individuals who had better mental health were more likely to obtain online health information, compared to those who had lower mental health.

This study suggests that the Internet can be a tool for distributing health-related information; however, the population it reaches at present is limited. While much of the information can be presented online, medical service providers should be aware that many individuals with specific characteristics are less likely to utilize this resource. Of particular interest is that while there were some efforts on government websites for people to check their mental health, the results suggested that those who had lower mental health might not utilize this information.

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