

Trust in Health Information Sources among American Adults

Introduction

Americans increasingly have access to information from a widening array of online and offline sources, including health professionals, mass media, friends and relatives, and social media. The most notable change in the communication landscape in the past few decades has been the rapid diffusion of internet technology, which has placed an unprecedented amount of health information within reach of most Americans. Despite the accessibility of online health information, however, the web has not displaced traditional sources of health information, with interpersonal sources (such as health care professionals, and friends and family) remaining widely utilized.

Although health information is available from many sources, not all sources are seen as equally trustworthy. Whether individuals trust certain information sources has implications for health communication efforts, as numerous studies have shown that trust in a particular source of information affects whether individuals will be exposed to information from that source, whether they will pay attention to information from that source,

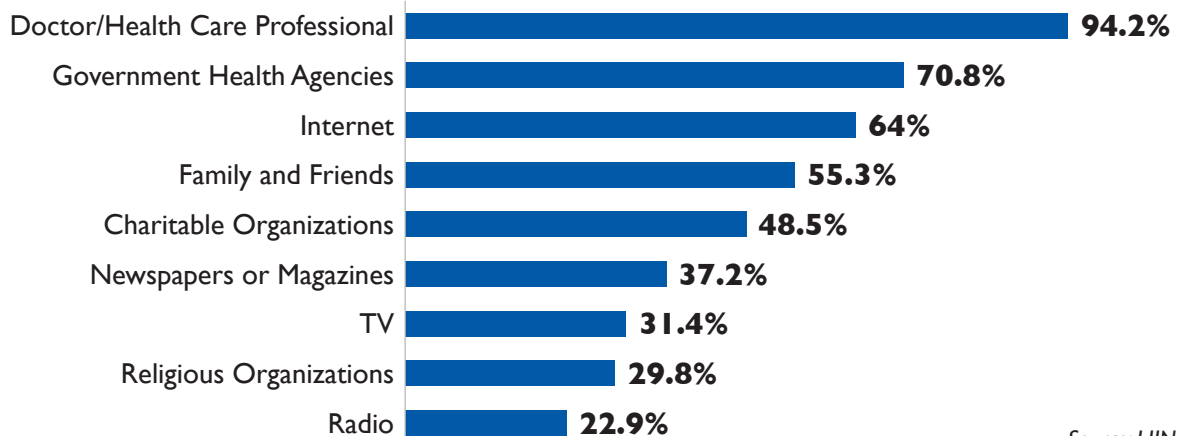
Quick Facts

- Trust in traditional mass media channels (like television and radio) declined between 2005 and 2013.
- Between 2005 and 2013, trust in physicians remained relatively high and stable.
- Trust in the internet has remained moderate and stable from 2005 to 2013.
- Trust in information sources differs by select demographic variables, including sex, age, education level, income, race/ethnicity, and English language proficiency.

and whether they will choose to act on the information obtained from that source. Research also suggests that trust in information sources differs by demographic characteristics, including sex, age, education level, income, race/ethnicity, and English language proficiency. This raises the possibility that differential trust in sources of health information, by shaping individuals' cognitive and behavioral reactions to information, may play a role in health disparities.

This HINTS *Brief* examines trends and sociodemographic predictors of trust in different sources of health information.

Percentage of Americans Reporting “Some” or “A Lot” of Trust in Health Information Sources, 2018



Source: HINTS 5 Cycle 2

Trust in Sources of Health Information: Trends and Sociodemographic Differences

An analysis featured in a recently published volume on e-health used HINTS data from 2005, 2008, 2011, and 2013 to assess how trust in sources of health information has changed over time. Between 2005 and 2013, trust in physicians remained high, with 67–70 percent of Americans stating that they trust physicians “a lot.” Trust in family and friends was moderate but relatively stable over this period, as was trust in the internet as a source of health information. Trust in television and radio, however, declined substantially: In 2005, about 72 percent of Americans reported trusting television and 58 percent reported trusting radio, while in 2013 those numbers dropped to 46 percent and 27 percent, respectively.

Further analysis of 2013 HINTS data to identify sociodemographic predictors of trust in different sources revealed that those who did not speak English or had incomes below \$15,000 were less likely to report high trust in physicians compared to those who spoke English “very well” and those earning more than \$75,000 per year. The analysis also showed that individuals with higher educational attainment and higher incomes were more likely to trust the internet compared to those who had less than a high school education or made less than \$15,000 a year. Additionally, Non-Hispanic Black Americans and Hispanic Americans were about twice as likely to trust television compared to Non-Hispanic Whites.

How Can This Inform Your Work?

These HINTS data can inform the development and implementation of health communication efforts, especially with regard to source or channel selection for message delivery. For example, HINTS data suggest that television is still an effective channel for reaching Hispanic and Non-Hispanic Black populations, and the fact that physicians remain the most trusted source of health information among all Americans suggests that the presence of physicians could help increase trust in messages delivered through other channels (including internet, TV, and radio). However, the finding that certain population groups don’t have as much trust in physicians underscores the importance of supporting providers in their efforts to communicate about health. Finally, the lower levels of trust in the internet observed among less educated and less affluent individuals may be due to a lack of digital access or lack of self-efficacy in internet information-seeking, suggesting a need for digital literacy interventions that give people the skills and confidence to locate credible information on the internet.

About HINTS

hints.cancer.gov

The National Cancer Institute (NCI) created the Health Information National Trends Survey (HINTS) to monitor changes in the rapidly evolving field of health communication. The survey data can be used to understand how adults use communication channels to obtain health information for themselves and their loved ones. It can also help practitioners create more effective health communication strategies. The HINTS survey has been fielded 11 times to date.

HINTS *Briefs* provide a snapshot of noteworthy, data-driven research findings. They introduce population-level estimates for specific questions in the survey and summarize significant research findings resulting from analyses of how certain demographic characteristics influence specific outcomes. Many *Briefs* summarize research findings from recent peer-reviewed journal articles that have used HINTS data.

For More Information on Cancer

- Call the NCI Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER
- Visit <https://www.cancer.gov>
- Order NCI publications at <https://pubs.cancer.gov/ncipl/home.aspx>
- Visit [Facebook.com/cancer.gov](https://www.facebook.com/cancer.gov) and <https://www.youtube.com/ncigov>

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