

Trends in Cancer Information Seeking

A Decade of Change in Health Information Technologies and Patient Engagement

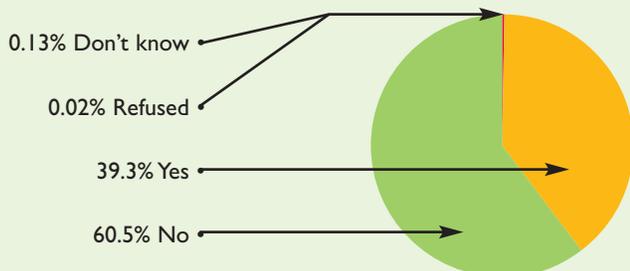
The past few decades have witnessed dramatic changes in the health communication and informatics environment. Innovation has expanded the availability and diversity of communication channels and technologies, significantly increasing access to health information. The public has shown interest in these technological changes, and the evolving health communication and informatics environment appears to be changing the way individuals and populations engage in their health and health care.

Although information technology has considerable potential to accelerate evidenced-based efforts to reduce the cancer burden through personalized communication about risk, prevention behavior, social support, and individualized networks of care, questions remain regarding population engagement with technology to support their health and health information needs. In this HINTS Brief, we describe trends in cancer and health information seeking across time and document which information sources are most used and most trusted by Americans.

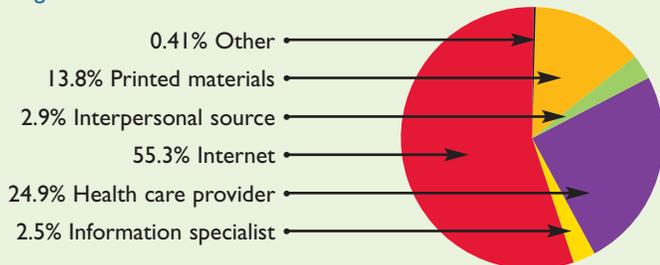
Cancer Information Seeking

According to HINTS data collected in 2008, nearly 40% of the U.S. population (39.3%) has searched for cancer information at some point. The two most frequently used sources of cancer information were the Internet (55.3%) and health care providers (24.9%).

Have you ever looked for information about cancer from any source?*



The most recent time you looked for cancer information, where did you go first?*



Health Information National Trends Survey, 2007 (HINTS, 2007); URL: cancercontrol.cancer.gov/hints; HINTS 2007 database, National Cancer Institute, DCCPS, Behavioral Research Program, Health Communication and Informatics Research Branch. Data collection January–May, 2008; Public data release February 2009.

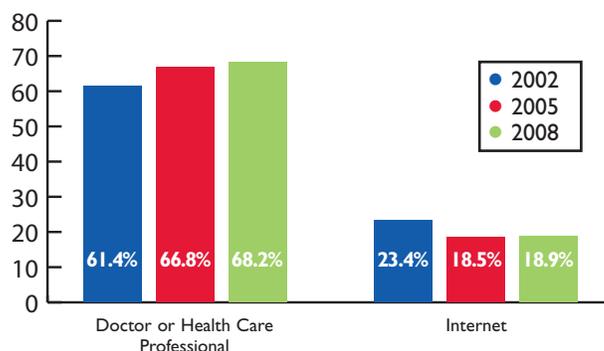
*Due to rounding, percentages may not equal 100.

What Sources Do Americans Trust?

A recent HINTS publication by Hesse and colleagues published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* examines data across three administrations of HINTS (2002–2008) to explore the public's use of and trust in sources of health information, with a particular focus on physicians and the Internet. A striking finding from this research is that in spite of rapid increases in the availability of health information on the Internet, the public's trust in online health information has decreased over time. Meanwhile, trust in physicians as a source of health information has remained high and actually increased from 2002 to 2008. Despite the public's reported skepticism of online content, health information seeking on the Internet remains high. Moreover, HINTS data suggest that access to online health information does not erode trust in physicians and health care providers. Rather, trust in providers may actually be increasing because consumers depend on their health care providers to make sense of health information found online.

HINTS data also show an increase in online communication between health care providers and their patients. In 2002, just 7% of the population used e-mail or the Internet to communicate with their health care provider; however, this number steadily increased to 9.6% in 2005 and 13.5% in 2008.

Trust in Source for Cancer or Health Information



Quick Facts

- Almost one-half of the U.S. population has looked for cancer information.
- Trust in the Internet as a source of health or cancer information has decreased over time.
- Trust in health care providers as a source of health or cancer information has increased over time.
- Use of e-mail and the Internet to communicate with doctors and health care providers is increasing.

In this HINTS Brief, we discuss trends in cancer information seeking.

Use of and Trust in Health Information Sources: Differences by Income and Education

HINTS 2005 data reveal interesting differences in use of and trust in health information sources by key sociodemographic characteristics.

Income

Although cancer information seeking is pervasive and increasing across the population, adults with lower incomes are consistently less likely than adults with higher incomes to report ever looking for cancer information from any source. Approximately 40% of adults with incomes less than \$25,000 per year have ever sought cancer information, while more than 60% of adults with incomes more than \$75,000 per year say they have. Trust in health information sources follows a similar income pattern, with those making more than \$75,000 per year reporting a lot of trust in doctors (75.6%) and the Internet (20.1%) and those making less than \$25,000 per year being less likely to report a lot of trust in doctors (60.5%) and the Internet (16.5%).

Education

Adults with higher levels of education are also more likely to report seeking cancer information and trusting health information from doctors and the Internet than those with lower levels of education. For example, 64% of college graduates say that they have looked for cancer information, compared with 23.9% of those with less than a high school education. While 59.8% of individuals with less than a high school education report a lot of trust in doctors, 74.8% of college graduates do. For trust in the Internet as a source of health information, 20.6% of college graduates report a lot of trust in the Internet compared to 17.3% of those with less than a high school education.

How Can This Inform Your Work?

The trends in health information seeking observed across the last decade point to interesting challenges and opportunities for improving population health and realizing the potential of health information technology.

- Individuals with access to health care should be encouraged to proactively engage in health management and disease prevention within the health care setting and beyond.
- Health information technology can support and empower individuals by enabling them to own and manage their health information.
- As highly trusted sources of information, health care providers can employ health information technology to deliver personalized advice and to support patient engagement.
- Health services researchers and behavioral scientists can utilize information technology in their efforts to develop and implement research protocols that support the discovery of more cost-effective systems for care delivery.

About HINTS
<http://hints.cancer.gov>

The National Cancer Institute (NCI) fielded the first Health Information National Trends Survey (HINTS) in 2002 and 2003, surveying 6,369 Americans. Subsequent surveys followed in 2005 (5,586 Americans surveyed) and 2008 (7,674 Americans surveyed). HINTS was created to monitor changes in the rapidly evolving field of health communication. The survey data can be used to understand how adults 18 years and older use different communication channels to obtain health information for themselves and their loved ones, and to create more effective health communication strategies across populations.

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

For More Information on Cancer

- Call the NCI Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER
- Visit <http://cancer.gov>
- Order NCI publications at <https://cissecure.nci.nih.gov/ncipubs/>



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