

Growth in Patient-Provider Internet Communication (2003–2013)

Introduction

Internet-enabled forms of communication, such as email, are increasingly becoming a standard part of health care delivery. Studies show that internet-enabled patient-provider communication can enhance patient satisfaction, save time, facilitate patient engagement, and improve health outcomes. These communication channels can also facilitate patients' access to care by eliminating the cost and burden associated with an in-person appointment, such as arranging for transportation and childcare.

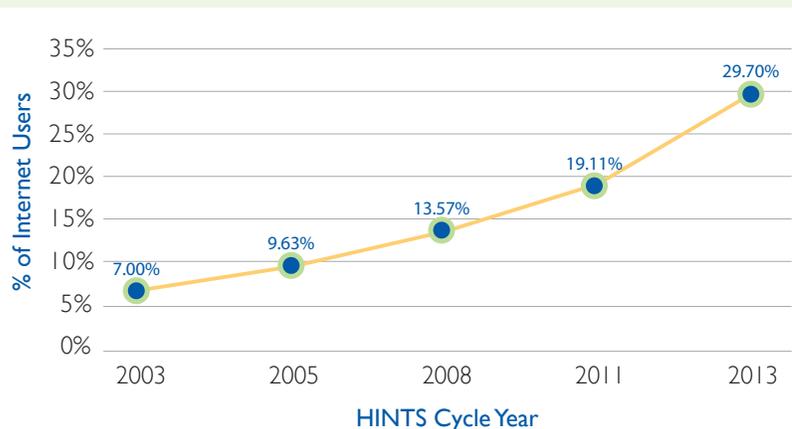
Despite the potential of internet-enabled communication to improve access to care, health care quality, and health outcomes, studies from the early 2000s indicated that the prevalence of online patient-provider communication was relatively low (below 10 percent). Widespread use of the internet for patient-provider communication has been moderated by important contextual factors, such as a lack of access to internet technology among certain subpopulations (known as the "digital divide") and provider hesitance. However, as federal initiatives

Quick Facts

- Research suggests that the use of internet-enabled forms of communication can enable greater access to care, improve health outcomes, and increase patient satisfaction.
- The percentage of internet users who reported communicating online with a health care provider in the past 12 months increased from 7 percent in 2003 to 30 percent in 2013.
- Despite the utility of these communication channels, their widespread use may be hindered by contextual factors, including the digital divide and lack of adequate reimbursement to providers for electronic communication with patients.

have incentivized the use of secure messaging via patient portals, and overall access to the internet has increased over the past decade (with the introduction of internet-ready mobile devices improving access for underserved groups especially), more patients have been able to take advantage of the internet to communicate with their providers. This HINTS *Brief* looks at the current state of online patient-provider communication and how it has changed over time.

Percentage of Internet Users Who Have Communicated Online with a Provider in the Past 12 Months



Trends in Online Patient-Provider Communication, 2003–2013

In a recently published study, researchers analyzed data across 5 cycles of HINTS (2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, and 2013) to examine trends in the use of online tools for patient-provider communication. The study found that the percentage of internet users reporting that they communicated online with a health care provider in the past 12 months steadily increased over time, from 7 percent in 2003 to 30 percent in 2013. Between 2003 and 2013, the odds of communicating with a provider online increased for women and college graduates, but decreased for individuals between 65 and 74 years of age, those without health insurance, individuals with no history of cancer, and individuals living in a nonmetropolitan (i.e., rural) area. This suggests that the digital divide still exists for some populations who experience barriers to utilizing the internet and other emerging technologies for health.

How Can This Inform Your Work?

HINTS data show that the proportion of internet users who communicate with their providers electronically increased significantly between 2003 and 2013. However, certain populations are less likely to use internet-enabled means of communication to contact their health care providers, possibly due to a lack of internet access or technical skills. While policy and infrastructure interventions (such as reimbursing providers for emailing patients and increasing broadband coverage) are needed to improve patient access to, and use of, electronic communication tools, providers and public health professionals can also address barriers to technology-enabled patient-provider communication.

For instance, all medical practices (especially in rural areas) could offer an electronic means for patients to contact their providers between appointments. In addition to simply providing access, medical practices could encourage patients to contact their providers through these channels and also offer patients tutorials on the messaging feature of their patient portal or any other system that can be used to communicate with providers. This type of training could be especially beneficial for certain populations, such as the elderly or those with lower educational attainment, who may not be as comfortable with these technologies and who currently seem to use web-enabled communication channels at lower rates compared to other groups. Developing resources that address concerns providers have about electronic communication could also expand the use of these technologies by increasing the number of providers who incorporate these tools into routine practice and actively encourage their patients to use them.

About HINTS

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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 1 (2003)

surveyed 6,369 Americans; HINTS 2 (2005) surveyed 5,586 Americans; HINTS 3 (2008) surveyed 7,674 Americans; HINTS 4 Cycle 1 (2011) surveyed 3,959 Americans; HINTS 4 Cycle 2 (2012) surveyed 3,630 Americans; HINTS 4 Cycle 3 (2013) surveyed 3,185 Americans; HINTS 4 Cycle 4 (2014) surveyed 3,677 Americans; HINTS FDA (2015) surveyed 3,787 Americans; HINTS 5 Cycle 1 (2017) surveyed 3,285 Americans; HINTS FDA Cycle 2 (2017) surveyed 1,736 Americans; and HINTS 5 Cycle 2 (2018) surveyed 3,504 Americans.

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.

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