

Adolescents' perceptions of the internet as a health information source

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Introduction The internet offers young people easy and anonymous access to information about health and medicines. More than 75 per cent of young people in the United Kingdom have used the internet,¹ and over 99 per cent of British secondary schools provide Internet access for students.² Websites with health content aimed at teenagers, such as www.ruthinking.co.uk (sexual health), are being advertised through youth magazines. A recent survey in the United States showed that adolescents sought internet health information more often than they bought items or went to chatrooms online.³ The aim of this study was to explore how UK adolescents use the internet for information about health and medicines.

Method Fifteen single-gender focus groups were conducted in the UK with a convenience sample of 72 students aged 11 to 18 years from seven schools, reflecting diversity of age, ethnicity and socio-economic status. The discussion explored students' general use of the internet, experiences and perceptions of searching for on-line health information, and other sources used for information about health and medicines.

Groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Qualitative analysis of transcripts identified common and contrasting themes.

Results The majority of the participants perceived that the internet could be useful for finding information about health and medicines. A specific situation where adolescents perceived that the anonymity of the internet gave it advantages over other channels was for embarrassing problems, such as sexual health queries.

Less than one-third of the adolescents reported past use of the internet to find health information, but most of these users found their internet information useful. The circumstances under which the information had been sought varied, most commonly including illness of a family member, or personal concerns such as diet, weight control, exercise and sexual health.

Most seekers used a search engine to start their query; finding relevant information and evaluating it, however, was regarded as a challenge.

Several participants cited other me-

FOCAL POINTS

- * The internet offers young people easy and anonymous access to information about health and medicines
- * A series of focus groups with United Kingdom school students explored their perceptions of the internet as a health information source
- * Less than one-third of the students had looked for health information online; those who did were as likely to look for information about a family member's illness as their own health concerns (including diet/exercise, sexual health)
- * Most health information seekers had used a search engine for their query, and their success was determined by their skill at evaluating the search results that they received
- * There are opportunities for educational interventions through schools and pharmacies to help young adults to optimise their use of the internet for health information

dia (magazines or television) as their stimulus for using the internet. Only one participant cited a health professional — their doctor — who encouraged them to find extra information about a prescription medicine.

The majority of participants were unwilling to buy medicines over the internet, and few had seen advertisements for medicines online.

Discussion Although not the majority, a significant number of adolescents had used the internet to answer a variety of questions regarding health and medicines. In some instances, the adolescent was seeking health information for other family members, perhaps as the household "internet expert", which may give him or her extra responsibility and status, and increase their exposure to information about health and medicines.

Use of a search engine was the primary strategy for information seeking; but the usefulness of the information found would depend on the user's ability to search, sift and interpret effectively. Updated resources about credible and effective health websites, to overcome some of the challenges of search engine sifting, should be developed for distribution through schools and pharmacies.

It was notable that health professionals were rarely cited as encouraging adolescents to use the internet; this may be due to the nature of the information sought (wellness rather than ill-

ness). Pharmacists could be well placed to support adolescents if internet searching initiates a consultation, acting as an information source about good health internet sites that reinforce guidance that they give, and should recognise that adolescents may be the expert technology users for other family members who have health queries.

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