

This Just In... reports are a quick summary of new health marketing and communication research and trends. These brief “nuggets” spotlight new findings with communication practice implications for CDC and its public health partners.

Brought to you by the Strategic and Proactive Communication Branch in the Division Communication Services, Office of the Associate Director for Communication, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Teenagers can tell the truth about health issues in an e-mail first.

Research objective: To investigate concerns and difficulties relating to communication among adolescents seeking online health advice. It is widely known that barriers exist in communication between adolescents and health professionals. However, little is known about the actual language used by young people articulating such difficulties and whether email might allow them to overcome these problems.

Methods: The content of 62,794 email messages sent to the online general practitioner, Dr. Ann at the adolescent health website, Teenage Health Freak (<http://www.teenagehealthfreak.org>) were analyzed for keywords in their questions about health concerns.

Findings: Young people were adept at articulating their health concerns electronically with high degrees of candor and directness. The teens also described numerous difficulties in disclosing such concerns to other people, in particular to parents and doctors. However, they readily expressed their concerns by email, displaying elevated levels of directness, particularly in relation to potentially sensitive or embarrassing topics. A key finding is that adolescents, in their emails to online health professionals, regularly express difficulty in first approaching adults face-to-face for advice and information about their health concerns. In particular, the recurring use of verbs such as ‘tell’ and ‘talk,’ which emphasize verbal interaction, and their negatively loaded curse terms point specifically to problems directly engaging in face-to-face exchanges. The anonymity of the Internet, specifically its facility of providing advice without the risk of parents finding out about their concerns, make it a viable source of health information for adolescents.

Practice implications for health marketers and communication professionals:

These results suggest that dissemination strategies that rely on providing healthcare providers information to be delivered in face-to-face exchanges with adolescent patients may be unsuccessful. Given the regularity with which electronic forms of communication are used by young people, for example, 75% of today's youth have used the Internet to seek health advice; there is arguably greater scope for more extensive and systematic use of email in health care. As the popularity of interactive websites specializing in adolescent health testifies, email and online messaging have the potential to reach out and connect with young people who might be reluctant to engage with more traditional face-to-face health services. Though email should not be a substitute for face-to-face consultations, it can be a supplement for face-to-face communication. In this vein, adolescents and teenagers would first be better able to communicate their health concerns with a practitioner anonymously before following up with a face-to-face consultation if required. For teenagers apprehensive about visiting their family doctor, having electronic contact with a physician first might encourage subsequent face-to-face visits. Within public health communication, the results suggest several potential health literacy implications with a focus on improving providers' skills in developing trust and open communication with adolescent patients.

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