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Internet research builds cancer patients' confidence

Newly diagnosed cancer patients who use the Internet to gather information about their disease have a more positive outlook and are more active participants in their treatment, according to a new Temple University study published in the March 2006 issue of the Journal of Health Communication.

"This is the first study to look at the relationship between Internet use and patient behaviors," said principal investigator and public health professor Sarah Bass, Ph.D. "We wanted to see if access to readily available information about their condition helped patients to cope with issues such as hair loss and other treatment side effects."

For this study, the researchers recruited patients who called a National Cancer Institute-funded 1-800 number, where trained specialists answered questions about the disease and directed callers to cancer-related resources in their area. Once selected, the 442 participants were broken into "direct user, indirect user and non user" categories based on their Internet usage patterns.

According to Bass, direct and indirect users tended to be females between the ages of 50 and 60 who had graduated from college and made more than \$60,000 a year.

During the survey, Bass and her colleagues began to see strong parallels between Internet use and the patients' feelings about their treatment. Those who used the Internet and those who received Internet information from family members or friends were more likely to view their relationship with their doctors as a partnership, and were more comfortable asking questions and challenging treatment alternatives.

"They saw the Internet as a powerful tool that enhanced their decision-making ability," Bass said.

Moreover, Bass and her team were pleasantly surprised by the number of early non-users who after eight weeks turned to the Internet for information. When asked about the change, approximately 75 percent said that either family/friend encouragement or the cancer diagnosis itself prompted them to increase their Internet use.

"They didn't want to feel powerless or have to rely on the doctor to make all of the decisions," Bass said.

Bass warns that as more and more funding is cut for medical phone hotlines, now is the time for doctors and health workers to encourage patients to do their own research on the Web. "But as with most things, let the buyer beware. Stick to Web sites that are associated with large, well-recognized non-profit groups, or get recommendations from your physician."

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The complete study can be viewed @
http://www.temple.edu/news_media/bass_study.html