

S.J. Czaja, J. Sharit, S.N. Nair, C.C. Lee. *Older adults and the use of e-health information. Gerontechnology* 2008; 7(2):97. The Internet is emerging as a vital knowledge resource for consumers who need health information. In 2006, 113 million adults searched online for information on topics related to specific diseases, medical treatments and health insurance¹. One concern relates to the ability of people who are not 'medical specialists' to find and comprehend information that is available online. This concern is particularly relevant to older adults as they are likely to be in need of and seek medical care. This paper will present findings from a study examining the ability of older adults to find and interpret Internet-based health information. Data regarding perceptions of usability will also be presented. **Methods** One hundred adults, aged 50–80 years, included males (28%) and females (72%) ranging in age from 50–85 years were included in the study. The sample was fairly well educated; most participants (93%) had some college education or beyond. Participants were asked to use the Internet to solve six health-related problems. Participants were required to write down the answers to the queries. In addition, their actual performance was captured using Hypercam, a screen capture utility. Prior to the task participants completed a Technology/Computer Experience Questionnaire, a health literacy questionnaire (S-TOFHLA), and a questionnaire that assessed their knowledge of the health domains included in the task problems. Following the completion of the task, they completed the health knowledge questionnaire a second time and a usability rating questionnaire. Their performance on the problems was also evaluated. **Results and Discussion** Overall, the data indicated that the participants had difficulty finding and interpreting health information. Most participants obtained less than 50% accuracy with respect to their responses to the problem scenarios. Also, about 20% of the sample quit at least one problem. In addition, there was no significant change in domain knowledge pre vs. post task ($p > .05$). Examination of the Hypercam data in combination with a review of the website allowed us to identify some usability problems and generate some potential design recommendations. For example, one problem users encountered difficulty using the scroll bar to access information that appeared at the bottom of web pages. They also had difficulty understanding the 'or' and 'and' operators. The data also suggested that the labelling of the various links need to be less ambiguous and more clearly identified. Participants also reported problems with usability. For example the majority of participants reported getting 'lost' while searching for information and that they became frustrated searching for the needed information. The data suggest that current health websites may be difficult for older adults to use. These are important findings the Internet is increasingly being used as vehicle for health information. These findings are discussed in terms of the implications for training and Interface design.

References

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