Chronic pain patients' use of online health information: a cross sectional study

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Background and objective:
Internet is extensively used to search for health information. A Swiss survey* showed that 79.3% of the persons regularly use Internet. Reasons for use were: e-mail (93%), reading news (73%), shopping (55%) and looking for health information (55%). While general data is available, little is known about how patients with chronic pain use Internet with respect to their condition and to medication intake. This study addresses these questions.

Methods:
A cross-sectional study was conducted from July to December 2012. A questionnaire investigating various aspects of Internet use as well as of pain-related issues was given to the patients referred to the Multidisciplinary Pain Centre of the Geneva University Hospitals.

Results:
• Out of 50 newly referred patients who were contacted for the study 29 accepted participation
• 65% of females, mean age 53 y.o. (SD=1.6)  
• Origins of pain: musculoskeletal (62%), neuropathic (24%), on average 6 years (SD=1)
• All except one (further excluded) had a PC at home and 69% used Internet at least once a day
• 79% sought for health information: on those 76% indicated their interest in disease information and 48% in treatment and drug safety
• Concerning searches for pain information: neuropathic pain (46%), low back pain (39%) and muscular pain (32%)
• Chronic pain patients have used Google (86%), 29% also checked a specific web site
• They tend to discuss found information with a close one (50%), their physician or nobody (both 29%)

• The effects of online search:
  1. Ask physician new questions or look for a second opinion (50%)
  2. Changed approach to take care of own health (32%)
  3. Influenced decision regarding treatment of own disease (21%)
  4. Changed approach to manage pain problem (14%)

• 57% felt satisfied with information received, 32% felt confident to ask new questions, 21% overwhelmed with information quantity
• 50% of patients would like to have access to tools to evaluate quality of online health information and have a list of web sites recommended by their physician.

Conclusions:
• The majority of these chronic pain patients have made an extensive use of Internet to search for health information, especially looking for medications information while receiving opioids and antidepressants
• They reported to be satisfied with their online searches
• A number of the respondents used the information to refine their questions and get back with them to their physician.

* http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/fr/index/themen/16/04/key/approche_globale.indicator.30106.301.html
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