

Internet first choice for many women seeking medical information

About 30% of women responding to an online survey said online communities help them prepare for a visit to the physician.

By [PAMELA LEWIS DOLAN](#), amednews staff. *Posted April 26, 2010.*

Nearly half of women seeking health answers online do so first, before talking to their doctors or family members, according to a Harris Interactive poll, conducted on behalf of iVillage, an online community for women.

The online survey of 2,608 adults, 1,342 of whom were women, found that anonymity and the ability to share common experiences with other members of an online community are what drives 49% of the women respondents to look online first. About half that, 25%, said they would go to a doctor first.

More than half of the mothers surveyed said they turn to the Internet first when it comes to researching a health question.

By comparison, 38% of the men, and 38% of the fathers responding to the online survey said they turn to the Internet first for health questions.

Online peers have offered help with problems for 31% of the women, and 39% of the mothers.

"This research further demonstrates what iVillage has always known about women -- they place tremendous value in the power of support from their online peers, as well as expert advice, to resolve the many demands they face," Jennifer Barrett, health editor for iVillage, said in a statement. The release of the survey results coincided with the launch of iVillage's new health site.

But beyond iVillage's corporate reasons for sponsoring and releasing the survey, and the survey pool of people who were already involved in online communities, experts said the results ring true.

Roland Goertz, MD, a family physician from Waco, Texas, and president-elect of the American Academy of Family Physicians, said it's no surprise that women go to the Internet first, because online use has become so prevalent in people's lives. It's because the Internet has become the preferred method of communication and

information gathering that physicians need to embrace it as way to augment the patient relationship, Dr. Goertz said.

Barrett said the survey showed that women are using the Internet to do just that. "For patients, the time spent doing research online may help them get the most out of the time they do have with their doctors. Our survey found that more women are going online to seek health information, resources and support, but certainly not in lieu of seeing their doctor."

Although 21% of the women responding to the online survey said they can talk about things online that might be embarrassing to talk to a health professional about, 30% said online communities help to better prepare them for a visit to the physician's office.

This kind of participation can sometimes be a burden on physicians, Dr. Goertz said, especially if physicians must correct information patients read online. That has been "a frustration for a lot of my colleagues."

Dr. Goertz recommends physicians have a list of trusted online sources to hand out to patients.

Physicians also need to create settings that make patients feel comfortable enough to ask questions and discuss sensitive topics, he said. Technology in the practice can help. Studies of practices with kiosks where patients check themselves in for the visit have found that patients are more willing to reveal sensitive information to system-generated questions than they are to the physician or practice staff.