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Few Seniors Go Online for Health-Care Needs

TUESDAY, Aug. 2, 2016 (HealthDay News) — Hopes have been high that digital technology would improve seniors' health care, but a new study suggests that few older Americans are on board.

The study, which surveyed thousands of Medicare patients, found that only 5 percent to 8 percent were going online to fill prescriptions, deal with health insurance or communicate with their doctors. And only 16 percent were searching for health information online.

Researchers acknowledged that some seniors can be tech-wary or unable to afford computers and internet service. But they were still surprised by the findings.

"There's been this general belief that digital health technology will 'rescue' seniors, and improve their health care quality," said Dr. David Levine, lead researcher on the study and an internist at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston.

It's true, he said, that many older adults do use cellphones and go online for some things. But health care, apparently, is not one of them.

"When it comes to more-advanced technology, they're just not using it," Levine said.

Dr. Kavita Patel is a fellow at the Washington, D.C.-based Brookings Institution whose work focuses on health care quality. She, too, was struck by the single-digit figures the study turned up.

"Only 8 percent were filling prescriptions online?" Patel said. "Only 7 percent contacted their clinicians [online]? This study shows we can't make assumptions about people's use of digital technology."

But does that aversion to technology make a difference in seniors' health? It's not clear from the study, but Patel said the trends are worrisome.

The hope, she said, has been that digital technology would make health care more convenient, efficient and safe. When primary care offices have patient "portals" — secure websites — patients and doctors can keep track of vital information like prescriptions, lab results and immunizations.

Providers can, for example, send patients email reminders about prescription refills or flu shots, Patel said.

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She said that kind of communication could be especially helpful for Americans 65 and older — the population group with the most illness and highest health care costs.

The findings, published in the Aug. 2 issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association, come from an annual, nationally representative survey of Medicare patients.

In 2011, just over 7,600 patients responded. They were 75 years old, on average, and 76 percent said they had cellphones. Sixty-four percent said they used computers, though only 43 percent used the internet. The patients were followed yearly until 2014.

Very few seniors went online for health care reasons — even to find general health information. And there was little change by 2014: At that point, 14 percent of respondents were using more digital health methods, while 10 percent had cut back on their use.

"We found only a very small increase in the past few years," Levine said. Plus, he noted, there were "stark" disparities among older adults.

Minorities were about 50 percent less likely than whites to be using digital health technology. Meanwhile, people with at least some college education were about five to 10 times more likely use it, compared to less-educated seniors.

To Levine, the findings raise questions about the nation's priorities when it comes to improving older adults' health care.

He questioned whether there has been too much emphasis on digital technology at the expense of efforts that might reach more seniors, such as wider use of community health workers. Community health workers are trained laypeople who can go with older adults to doctor appointments, help them understand their treatment plans and make house calls, among other things.

"We wonder whether resources could be better directed elsewhere," Levine said.

But if one goal is to get more seniors managing health care online, there's a lot of work to be done, according to Patel. She said the Medicare program and seniors' groups like AARP could do more to educate older adults on using digital health technology. As for dealing with health insurance online, Patel said, websites need to become more user-friendly for people of all ages.

SOURCES: David Levine, M.D., general internal medicine and primary care, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston; Kavita Patel, M.D., nonresident fellow, Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C.; Aug. 2, 2016, Journal of the American Medical Association. Copyright © 2016 HealthDay. All rights reserved.

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