

Teens, Technology, and Health Care



Francesco Leanza, MD^{a,b,*}, Diane Hauser, MPA^{a,b}

KEYWORDS

- Teens • Technology • Text messaging
- Computer-based or Web-based interventions • Chronic disease management
- Social media • Teen sexual health

KEY POINTS

- Teens prefer to receive text messages rather than e-mails as a form of communication.
- Computer-based screenings are acceptable to teens and helpful to providers for identifying and preventing high-risk behaviors.
- Web sites that address specific domains of teen health care should be easy to use, youth centered, connected to an organization that is recommended by the provider, and trustworthy.
- Social media can play a role in teen health, but should be connected to the teen's personal experience with a group or organization that focuses on the teen's specific condition (ie, other teens with the same condition).

INTRODUCTION

The use of technology and social media is ubiquitous among teens. Ninety-five percent of American teens are online at least sometimes, and this connectivity increasingly moves with them on a rapidly developing array of mobile devices.¹ It has been noted that trends in mobile connectivity among teens are a harbinger of future behaviors among adults, expanding the relevance of teen-focused technology initiatives. Smartphones, social media sites, and online videos and gaming have much potential to promote health and healthy behaviors in teens.

There is a growing body of research on teens and the use of technology with regard to their health care. To date, studies are small and imperfect. As a result it is difficult to extrapolate to the general population given that most studies are not considered high

^a Department of Family Medicine and Community Health, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, One Gustave L. Levy Place, New York, NY 10029, USA; ^b Institute for Family Health, 16 East 16th Street, New York, NY 10003, USA

* Corresponding author. Department of Family Medicine and Community Health, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, One Gustave L. Levy Place, New York, NY 10029, USA

E-mail address: fleanza@institute2000.org

quality from an evidence-based perspective. However, trends are emerging that are helpful when designing interventions for further study.

Health Information Seeking Among Teens

In the general population of online teens, 31% obtain health, dieting, or physical fitness information from the Internet according to a 2010 survey of adolescents and young adults by the Pew Internet & American Life project.² This survey also found that 17% of online teens report using the Internet to learn about health topics that are difficult to discuss with others, such as drug use and sexual health. Research on how teens search for and use health information is limited, with most studies using qualitative methods and small samples. One study found that adolescents do not search for health information with a critical eye.³ This small study showed that participants used a "trial-and-error approach to formulate search strings, scanned pages randomly instead of systematically, and did not consider the source of the content when searching for health information."³ Another study that tracked use of suggested health Web sites for adolescents with asthma and diabetes found that 60% of participants accessed at least one site over a 6-month period. Perceived usefulness and content, particularly stories, targeted toward teens were predictors of continued use of a Web site. Teens were more likely to use sites for information than for self-management purposes.⁴ One study of sources of information about suicide found that teens often use online sources for information about suicide, with 59% citing online sources.⁵ A survey of more than 700 young people who had previously reported knowledge of others who had attempted or committed suicide and had associated experiences of hopelessness and suicidal ideation found that the Internet and social networking sites were important sources of suicide stories for this group. However, only discussion forums were associated with increased suicidal ideation. The investigators suggest that social networking sites may provide increased exposure to suicide, and also greater social support.

Some Web sites contain low-quality and/or erroneous information. A study of sexual health information Web sites visited by teens found that 17% of sites reviewed contain at least one inaccuracy, and these were most likely to be related to complex (eg, contraception) or controversial (eg, abortion) topics.⁶ In another study, specifically of sexually transmitted infection (STI) sites available to teens, key information, such as primary prevention and partner testing, was often missing.⁷ To address concerns about the accuracy of online information, the organization Common Sense Media (commonsensemedia.org) draws on a national advisory board to rate media sites targeting children and teens, with specific reviews of health-related sites. Although teens are increasingly seeking health information online, the impact of the information on teen's health behavior is unclear and may not always be accurate. Health care professionals and organizations that work with teens should identify online health information that is both accurate and teen friendly.

Use of Technology for Health Care Engagement and Promotion Among Teens

A variety of technologies have been used to engage teens in their health both outside and inside the health care system. Because cell phone texting is currently the preferred form of communication among teens, a variety of adolescent health education initiatives involve texting.⁸ In San Francisco, Internet Sexuality Information, Inc partnered with the city's Department of Public Health to publicize a text messaging program, SEXINFO, through traditional media, which enables adolescents to find services related to sexual health. Teens use their phones to choose from a menu of concerns (eg, D4 to find out about human immunodeficiency virus [HIV]), and receive

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