

## No Significant Change in the Numbers of “Cyberchondriacs” – Those Who Go Online for Health Care Information

In March 2002, we reported that 53% of all adults (80% of those online) had been online to “look for information about health topics.” A new Harris Interactive survey finds that a virtually identical 52% claim to have done so. This is the first year in which we have not found an increase. In previous years the percentage of all adults who are “cyberchondriacs” (our word to describe these people) increased from 27% in 1998, to 34% in 1999, 47% in 2001 and to 53% last year.

Only time will tell whether the number of cyberchondriacs has plateaued or whether this is merely a brief pause before it continues to grow again.

**TABLE 1**

### Frequency Of Accessing Health Care Information Online: 1998-2003

“How often do you look for information online about health topics – often, sometimes, hardly ever or never?”

Base: Online adults

	1998	1999	2001	2002	February 2003
	%	%	%	%	%
Often	12	13	16	18	17
Sometimes	30	30	30	35	37
Hardly ever	29	31	30	27	23
Never	29	26	25	20	22
Total who have ever looked for health or medical information online	71	74	75	80	78

**TABLE 2**

### Cyberchondriacs: Trends

	1998	1999	2001	2002	February 2003
	%	%	%	%	%
Percent of all adults who are online*	38	46	63	66	67
Percent of all those online who have looked for health information online	71	74	75	80	78
Percent of all adults who have looked for health information online	27	34	47	53	52
Numbers of adults who have looked for health information online	54 million	69 million	97 million	110 million	109 million

\*Includes those online from home, office, school, library or other location

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## How do people use the Internet to look for health care information?

When people use the Internet to look for health care information, they are more likely to use a portal or search engine (54%) which can search many different sites than to go directly to a health-specific site (20%) or another specific site with a health care section (17%). These proportions have not changed much since our previous surveys in 2001 and 2002.

**TABLE 3**

### Where People Go To Look For Health Topics Online

“The last time you looked for information online about a health topic where did you FIRST go to get the information you were interested in? Did you FIRST go to a...?”

Base: Online adults who ever look for health care information online

	2001	2002	February 2003
	%	%	%
Site that focuses only on health-related topics, OR	24	26	20
A site that focuses on many subjects that may have a section devoted to health issues, OR	16	12	17
A portal or search engine which will allow you to search for health information across many different sites	52	53	54
Not sure/refused	7	8	8

### Demographic Differences

Cyberchondriacs, like the online population, are less common among the old and the poor, but they are found in substantial numbers in all segments of the population. While fewer low-income people are cyberchondriacs, more than a quarter (28%) of those with household incomes of less than \$15,000 have been online for health care information. One in five (21%) people aged 65 and over are cyberchondriacs, as are 40% of people with no college education and 35% of African Americans. However, the highest proportions of the public who are cyberchondriacs are to be found among those with postgraduate education (74%) or a college degree (76%) and those with household incomes above \$75,000 (79%).

**TABLE 4**  
**Cyberchondriacs Penetration**

Demographic profile of people who have looked for health information online.

Base: All adults

	2003
	%
Percent of all adults who have looked for health information online	52
<b>AGE</b>	
18-29	66
30-39	59
40-49	65
50-64	55
65+	21
<b>SEX</b>	
Male	50
Female	54
<b>EDUCATION</b>	
High School or less	40
Some College	60
College graduate	76
Post graduate	74
<b>INCOME</b>	
Less than \$15,000	28
\$15,000 to \$24,999	44
\$25,000 to \$34,999	59
\$35,000 to \$49,999	53
\$50,000 to \$74,999	65
\$75,000 and over	79
<b>RACE/ETHNICITY</b>	
White	56
African-American	35
Hispanic	52

## Methodology

This survey was conducted by telephone within the United States between February 12 and 16, 2003 among a nationwide cross section of 1,010 adults (ages 18+), of which 711 claimed to be online users. Figures for age, sex, race, education, number of adults and number of voice/telephone lines in the household were weighted where necessary to align them with their actual proportions in the population.

In theory, with a probability sample of this size, one can say with 95 percent certainty that the results have a statistical precision of plus or minus 3 percentage points (for the total sample), and 4 percentage points (for the online users sample), of what they would be if the entire adult population had been polled with complete accuracy. Unfortunately, there are several other possible sources of error in all polls or surveys that are probably more serious than theoretical calculations of sampling error. They include refusals to be interviewed (non-response), question wording and question order, interviewer bias, weighting by demographic control data and screening (e.g., for likely voters). It is impossible to quantify the errors that may result from these factors.

*These statements conform to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.*

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