



Health Communication and Health Information Technology

Overview

Objectives

Interventions & Resources

National Snapshots

Goal

Use health communication strategies and health information technology to improve population health outcomes and health care quality, and to achieve health equity.

Overview

Ideas about health and behaviors are shaped by the communication, information, and technology that people interact with every day. Health communication and health information technology (IT) are central to health care, public health, and the way our society views health. These processes make up the ways and the context in which professionals and the public search for, understand, and use health information, significantly impacting their health decisions and actions.

The objectives in this topic area describe many ways health communication and health IT can have a positive impact on health, health care, and health equity. They include:

- Supporting shared decision-making between patients and providers
- Providing personalized self-management tools and resources
- Building social support networks
- Delivering accurate, accessible, and actionable health information that is targeted or tailored
- Facilitating the meaningful use of health IT and the exchange of health information among health care and public health professionals
- Enabling quick and informed responses to health risks and public health emergencies
- Increasing health literacy skills
- Providing new opportunities to connect with culturally diverse and hard-to-reach populations
- Providing sound principles in the design of programs and interventions that result in healthier behaviors
- Increasing Internet and mobile access

Why Are Health Communication and Health Information Technology Important?

Effective use of communication and technology by health care and public health professionals can bring about an age of patient- and public-centered health information and services.^{1,2} By strategically combining health IT tools and effective health communication processes, there is the potential to:

- Improve health care quality and safety
- Increase the efficiency of health care and public health service delivery
- Improve the public health information infrastructure
- Support care in the community and at home
- Facilitate clinical and consumer decision-making
- Build health skills and knowledge



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Understanding Health Communication and Health Information Technology

All people have some ability to manage their health and the health of those they care for. However, with the increasing complexity of health information and health care settings, most people need additional information, skills, and supportive relationships to meet their health needs.

Disparities in access to health information, services, and technology can result in lower usage rates of preventive services, less knowledge of chronic disease management, higher rates of hospitalization, and poorer reported health status.^{3,4}

Both public and private institutions are increasingly using the Internet and other technologies to streamline the delivery of health information and services.⁵ This results in an even greater need for health professionals to develop additional skills in the understanding and use of consumer health information.⁶

The increase in online health information and services challenges users with limited literacy skills or limited experience using the Internet. For many of these users, the Internet is stressful and overwhelming—even inaccessible.⁷ Much of this stress can be reduced through the application of evidence-based best practices in user-centered design.⁸

In addition, despite increased access to technology, other forms of communication are essential to ensuring that everyone, including non-web users, is able to obtain, process, and understand health information to make good health decisions.⁹ These include printed materials, media campaigns, community outreach, and interpersonal communication.

Emerging Issues in Health Communication and Health Information Technology

During the coming decade, the speed, scope, and scale of adoption of health IT will only increase. Social media and emerging technologies promise to blur the line between expert and peer health information. Monitoring and assessing the impact of these new media, including mobile health, on public health will be challenging.¹⁰

Equally challenging will be helping health professionals and the public adapt to the changes in health care quality and efficiency due to the creative use of health communication and health IT. Continual feedback, productive interactions, and access to evidence on the effectiveness of treatments and interventions will likely transform the traditional patient-provider relationship. It will also change the way people receive, process, and evaluate health information. Capturing the scope and impact of these changes—and the role of health communication and health IT in facilitating them—will require multidisciplinary models and data systems.

Such systems will be critical to expanding the collection of data to better understand the effects of health communication and health IT on population health outcomes, health care quality, and health disparities.

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