

Most Orthopaedic Trauma Patients Are Using the Internet, But Do You Know Where They're Going?

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Purpose: The Internet is a resource that patients can utilize to learn about their injuries, treatment, surgeons, etc. Prior work demonstrated that if given a customized website, trauma patients are unlikely to use a customized website (10.7%). It is unknown, however, if patients are seeking information from elsewhere. The purpose of this study was to determine if trauma patients utilize the Internet as a resource and to determine if their choice of sites reliable. Our hypothesis was that the majority of orthopaedic trauma patients do not utilize the Internet to learn more about their injury and when they do, they are unlikely to use a reliable source.

Methods: 138 patients with operative injuries were surveyed in an orthopaedic trauma clinic at a Level-I trauma center within 6 months of their injury. A 30-question survey was administered that queried demographics, injury information, Internet access/habits, and eHealth Literacy Scale (eHEALS). The eHEALS is an 8-item scale used to measure perceived skills at finding, evaluating, and applying electronic health information. A 5-point Likert scale is used (1-strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-undecided, 4-agree, 5-strongly disagree) and the score range is from 8 to 40, with the higher score indicating higher eHealth literacy.

Results: 138 patients, with a mean age of 47.1 years (95% confidence interval [CI] 44.0-50.3; 51.1% female), were included in analysis. 57.0% of trauma patients reported using the Internet for information about their injury, despite 94.1% reporting access. This was significantly greater than the prior cohort's use of our custom site (57.0% vs 10.7%, $P < 0.0001$). eHealth literacy was higher in the more recent group (28.5 vs 26.42; $P = 0.0063$). 94.1% of patients reported access to the Internet, with smartphones as the primary device (72.1%), followed by desktop computer (11.6%), tablet (9.3%), and laptop computer (7.0%). Most frequently, patients looked up their treatment (69.7%), injury description (66.3%), physical therapy (44.9%), and surgeon (27.0%). Sites most commonly utilized included WebMD (54.8%), our hospital website (36.6%), Wikipedia (25.8%), Mayo Clinic (23.7%), and Facebook (16.1%). Education higher than high school, decreasing age, and higher income were associated with increased use of the Internet following injury.

Conclusion: Following traumatic orthopaedic injury, a majority of patients seek information from the Internet (57%), which is significantly greater than prior reports. Patients access information from a variety of sources, mostly outside of their home institution. This includes unreliable sources such as Wikipedia and Facebook. Our study illustrates the need for active referral to trusted sites and/or organizational partnership (eg, OTA/American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons) with common content providers to provide patients with accurate information about their injury and treatment.