

Seeking health information online among young, rural women: association with physical, mental and reproductive health

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Background: Going online for health information may be particularly useful for women living in rural and remote areas of Australia where access to health services is often limited. However, relatively little is known about the extent to which young women use the Internet as a health information resource and whether use differs by health status and among women living in rural and urban areas.

Methods: We aimed to identify the physical, mental and reproductive health factors associated with Internet use for health information, and whether this differed by area of residence. We use data from 17,069 young women aged 18-23 years who participated in the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health. Multivariable logistic regression was used to estimate the association between physical, mental and reproductive health factors and Internet use for health information among young women residing in urban, regional and rural areas.

Results: Overall, women accessed around three sources of information for their health. Doctors (77%) followed by family members (62%) and the Internet (44%) were the top three sources of health information. Women from urban and regional areas who used the Internet for health information were more likely to report psychological distress, self-reported mental health diagnoses, urinary or bowel symptoms, and menstrual symptoms than women who did not use the Internet. However, urban and regional women with children were less likely to use the internet for health information. In contrast, women from rural areas who had children were more likely use the internet as were those who had high levels of psychological distress.

Conclusions: Young women from regional and rural areas do rely on the Internet for their health information. Internet use is particularly common among regional and rural women experiencing psychological distress and among mothers living in rural areas. While the Internet offers anonymised information and support, it is important to develop strategies to assist, and direct, women to credible online health resources. Professionally supported, online self-care programs tailored to young women living in regional and rural areas may be important.