

Parents want e-mail consults with doctors, but don't want to pay for them

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Most parents would love to get an e-mail response from their kids' health care provider for a minor illness rather than making an office visit, but about half say that online consultation should be free, according to a new University of Michigan C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health.

In the poll this month, 77 percent of [parents](#) said they would be likely to seek email advice for their [children's](#) minor illness if that service were available. Only 6 percent of parents said they could currently get that e-mail advice from their child's [health care provider](#).

Parents in the poll reported a range of co-pays charged for office visits, from nothing to \$30 per visit. But about half of those polled felt any charge for an e-mail consultation should be less than that of an office visit. And 48 percent of those polled felt an online consultation should be free.

The poll surveyed 1,420 parents with a child aged 0 to 17 years old.

"Most parents know it can be inconvenient to schedule and get to an office visit for a sick child. An email consultation would prevent the hassles of scheduling and allow sick children to remain at home. Email also could be available after hours when their caregiver's office is closed, says Sarah J. Clark, M.P.H., associate director of the National Poll on Children's Health and associate research scientist in the University of Michigan Department of Pediatrics.

"But many health care providers don't have co-pays established for this kind of consultation, so we decided to ask parents what they think." Clark says the results of this poll mirror concerns that health care providers have expressed about email consultation. Providers argue that parents do not appreciate the unseen workload of email consultation, such as reviewing the child's medical

history, and documenting the email exchange within the child's medical record, says Clark, who also is associate director of the Child Health Evaluation and Research (CHEAR) Unit.

"Providers also worry about creating an expectation that they are on call to answer emails at all hours of the day. No one wants a child's care delayed if an email can't be answered right away," Clark says.

There also are concerns about making sure online systems are implemented to ensure the privacy and security of email exchanges.

Some [health care](#) providers already offer email consultation along with a package of online/electronic services that can include family conferences, texting and Web chats. These often come with a monthly or annual fee, rather than a fee per transaction.

"But given the overwhelming desire from parents for an [email](#) option, we hope these poll results can get the discussion started on the best way to use technology to get better, more convenient care options for young patients but still provides a workable solution for both providers and parents," Clark says.

Provided by University of Michigan Health System

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