

Young people turn to social media for advice on managing health conditions

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Social media is now a key source of information for many young adults with chronic health conditions, a new study conducted by University of Glasgow researchers has found.

Their paper published today in Health Expectations journal, examines the role of [social media](#) in young people's experiences of seeking out [health](#) information online.

While it is known that 'googling' information is common practice for many people with a health concern, often before consulting a GP or nurse, some [young adults](#) now also view the internet and information shared via their [social media networks](#) as a place to turn when managing their condition.

The study, which interviewed forty young adults aged between 18 and 30 years old with experience of diabetes or common [mental health](#) issues (such as depression or anxiety), found that the consumption of health-related content through social media channels such as Facebook and online forums supported their knowledge and

understanding of their condition.

Dr. Gillian Fergie, from the MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit at the University of Glasgow's Institute of Health and Wellbeing, said: "In this study young adults simply took for granted that 'going online' would be the primary means of accessing health-related information. While previous research has highlighted search engines as the primary gatekeeper to relevant [health information](#), what this study noted was that now many young adults also use links and recommendations from within their social networks too.

"They discussed how they actively and effortlessly negotiate between professionally produced content such as official leaflets or medical guidelines, and online user-generated content which might include personal accounts. Many said they used social media to draw on other people's experiences of a similar illness and inform their own health management strategies."

Young adults with diabetes or experience of [mental health issues](#) were interviewed because of the ongoing nature of their [health issues](#) and the likelihood of them continuously seeking health information online and through social media.

The study participants described looking up health information online for a number of reasons, including fact-finding. However for many of the young adults who took part in the study, searching for online health information was also a means of feeling less isolated and finding emotional support from people who were dealing with the same, or similar, health issues.

Speaking about their experiences:

- One young woman experiencing depression commented: "I started to feel like, 'well, maybe it is depression' and I did Google it –

the usual stuff, and I thought, 'yeah, this must be it'".

- One young woman with diabetes said: "The organisations, they're not the people who are actually dealing with diabetes on a day-to-day basis, the burden of having it so I think these diabetes Facebook pages, they're good... for just knowing that there are other people that have the same condition."
- One young man experiencing anxiety commented: "When I've been feeling down I've Googled "other people feeling down", just to see what they're dealing with... I don't want to know their problem; I just like to know that you're not the only person that feels that way. It's nice to know that people understand, you know, how it can beat you."

The study, 'Young adults' experiences of seeking online information about diabetes and mental health in the age of social media', is published in *Health Expectations* and was funded by the UK Medical Research Council (MRC).

More information: Gillian Fergie et al. Young adults' experiences of seeking online information about diabetes and mental health in the age of social media, *Health Expectations* (2015). DOI: [10.1111/hex.12430](https://doi.org/10.1111/hex.12430)

Provided by University of Glasgow

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