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Internet usage pattern for health related information and associated factors among undergraduate students, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Introduction: Internet is a global platform of interconnected networks providing information and communication facilities. It is a sprouting pool of health information these days. People, have become dynamic consumers of health information and strengthened their autonomy in making health-related decisions. Although, it educate and reassure the users, still disinformation or misinterpretation of information remains an issue in obtaining optimal benefit. The objective of this study was to describe the internet usage pattern for health-related information and influence of selected socio-demographic factors on usage patterns among undergraduate students of University of Jaffna, a state university.

Methods and Results: It was a descriptive cross-sectional study. A validated self-administered questionnaire was used as study instrument. Stratified random sampling method was performed to recruit the sample size of 426. The response rate was 81.69% (n= 348). Majority were females (54.3%, n=189) and the age range of the students was between 22 and 27 with the mean age of 24(±1) years. Significant proportion of students were Sinhala (47.1%, n=164) and Tamil (43.1%, n= 150). Greater number of students (42.2%, n=147) belonged to Faculty of Arts. Among the undergraduate students, 81.3% (n=283) had previous experience on accessing internet before entering the university. Majority of the students used smart phone (98.3%, n=342) and mobile data (81.6%, n= 284) for using internet. Around two third (67.2%, n= 234) of them accessed health information and only 54.3% (n=127) satisfied with their search. Students approached the internet in search for health information related to themselves (77.8%, n= 182) and their parents (63.2%, n=148). They used more than one information source (91.5%, n= 214) and also discussed with others (64.1%, n= 150) to confirm the reliability of the information. However, only 19.2% (n=45) had followed the health information and 15.4% (n=36) bought medicines based on the information provided by internet. More than half of the users (58.1%, n=136) searched about dietary supplements or nutritional supplements while 93.1% (n=216) searched regarding the uses and side effects of drugs prescribed to them. Although 81.2% (n=190) complained about difficulty in understanding the medical terms, 83.8% (n=196) ensured a vast improvement in their health knowledge. The non-users of internet for health information, (66.7%, n=76) reasoned out that they had high reliance on physicians than internet for receiving health related information. Both the year of study (p=0.006) and monthly family income (p=0.004) of undergraduate students were statistically associated with internet usage on health information, while year of study was found to have statistical association with following (p=0.010) and discussing (p=0.034) the health information with others. Gender, Religion and monthly family income were statistically associated with buying medicine according to the information obtained and course of study especially, management influenced having discussion with others. (p<0.05).

Conclusions/implications: In brief, health related internet usage could promote the safe usage of prescribed medicines. Undergraduates, having adequate knowledge on accessing the internet, could be encouraged more to pick out the best and reliable health sources in order to prevent the deleterious consequences caused by inaccurate health information.

Key words: Internet, Health information, Undergraduates

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