



Searching for a Good Doctor, Online

Ratings and reviews for nearly everything can be found online these days, including doctors. How are older adults using these ratings in their decisions about choosing doctors? In May 2019, the University of Michigan National Poll on Healthy Aging asked a national sample of adults age 50–80 about their use and perceptions of online doctor ratings.

Use of Online Doctor Ratings

Among older adults age 50–80, 43% had ever reviewed doctor ratings; 14% had reviewed ratings more than once in the past year, 19% had done so once in the past year, and 10% had reviewed ratings more than one year ago.

Among older adults who had looked up doctor ratings within the past year, 65% read reviews of a doctor they were considering, 34% read reviews to find a new doctor, and 31% read reviews for a doctor they had already seen.

Factors Influencing Decisions

Seven in ten respondents (71%) reported that they would select a doctor with many positive ratings, even if he or she had a few negative reviews. A similar percentage (69%) said that they would avoid selecting a doctor with mostly negative ratings even if that individual had a few very positive ratings. Two in five (41%) felt that the total number of reviews was important when selecting a doctor.

Also, for those who looked up ratings more than once in the past year, 67% had chosen a doctor due to good online ratings/reviews, and nearly all (96%) thought that the ratings matched their experience after meeting with the doctor. Among this group of more frequent users, more than half (57%) reported not choosing a doctor due to poor ratings.



Finding a Doctor Online

AMONG ADULTS AGE 50-80



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In choosing a doctor, one in five adults age 50–80 (20%) thought that online doctor ratings were very important. More important to the respondents, however, was how long it takes to get an appointment (61%), the doctor’s years of experience (42%), and a recommendation from another doctor (40%). Word of mouth information from family/friends was important to 23%, and the ability to interact with their doctor online for tasks such as emailing, refilling prescriptions and scheduling was very important to 21%.

State medical boards offer another way to get information on doctors, including disciplinary actions. While more than half of respondents (55%) were aware that they could look up information about doctors through state medical boards, only 8% reported having ever done so.

Few Leave Ratings

Only 7% of respondents had ever posted an online rating or review of a doctor. Over half (56%) of those who left a rating did so to praise a good experience, but one in three (35%) did so to criticize a bad experience. Of those who provided ratings, 17% did so because they were encouraged by office staff, and 8% left one because of encouragement from their doctor. About half of all respondents (53%) felt that some doctors influence their ratings to make themselves look good.

Implications

While some may think that choosing a doctor using online ratings is something only younger people may do, this national poll shows that this practice is also common among older adults. About half of

respondents were aware that other resources, such as state medical boards, exist but few had sought out those resources. Increasing awareness of online ratings among older adults could prove to be valuable for those interested in learning more about a doctor. Yet some online rating systems are still at risk of being “gamed,” including by the doctors and office staff themselves.

Though many older adults have viewed online ratings, the poll results highlight some potential limitations. Few respondents had ever left a rating, which suggests that the ratings may not be broadly representative of the overall population. While many doctors have ratings from only a small number of patients, for most people the overall number of ratings was not an important factor in choosing a doctor. About half of all participants felt that some doctors may influence their ratings to make themselves look better. Despite these concerns about representativeness and bias, almost all respondents who met a doctor after reading his or her online ratings felt that the ratings had been accurate.

Ratings are important to some people, but are by no means the most important factor for choosing a doctor: appointment availability, physician credentials, and recommendations from other providers or family members were all more important factors for older adults.

Finding a new doctor can be challenging and stressful. Online doctor ratings and reviews represent a potentially useful resource for older adults and are likely to continue to increase in use over time.

Data Source and Methods

This National Poll on Healthy Aging report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC (“Ipsos”), for the University of Michigan’s Institute for Healthcare Policy and Innovation. National Poll on Healthy Aging surveys are conducted using the Ipsos KnowledgePanel®, the largest national, probability-based panel in the U.S. Surveys are fielded two to three times a year with a sample of approximately 2,000 KnowledgePanel® members age 50–80.

This survey was administered online in May 2019 to a randomly selected, stratified group of older adults age 50–80 (n=2,256). Respondents were selected from the Ipsos web-enabled KnowledgePanel®, which closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the U.S. Census Bureau.

The completion rate was 76% among panel members contacted to participate. The margin of error is ±1 to 2 percentage points for questions asked of the full sample, and higher among subgroups.

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National Poll on Healthy Aging Team

| | |
|--|--|
| Preeti Malani, MD, MSJ, MS Director | David Hanauer, MD, MS Faculty Collaborator |
| Jeffrey Kullgren, MD, MS, MPH Associate Director | Dianne Singer, MPH Production Manager |
| Erica Solway, PhD, MPH, MSW Associate Director | Matthias Kirch, MS Data Analyst |

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