Published in final edited form as:

Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med. 2009 January ; 163(1): 91–92. doi:10.1001/archpediatrics.2008.503.

Teenagers Wanting Medical Advice: Is MySpace the Answer?

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Introduction

Roughly 55% of internet-using teens use social networking sites (ie, MySpace, Facebook) [1]. Many join health-related interest groups, which are often unmonitored. This poses a possible threat, because adolescents use the internet as a primary source of health information [2] and may be unable to judge sites' reliability and accuracy. Because social networking sites are relatively new, little research examines their use and influence. This study describes the content of asthma-related interest groups on MySpace.

Methods

Our institutional review board determined this study was exempt from approval because it was observing public behavior. Data were collected from MySpace groups composed of a main group page and forums (Figure). Each forum discussion is a thread of questions or comments ("posts") on a topic.

Data were collected over two weeks by KV & SP using an 'asthma' keyword search of MySpace groups. As MySpace content is continually changing, the sites were visited one time and all posts were recorded on a data collection form. The information on an asthma-related group's main page was classified a priori as relating to medication, lifestyle, diagnosis or other. Forum posts were classified a priori by reviewers as "asking a question", "answering a question", "providing advice", "sharing a personal story", "providing a link to an external site", "advertisement" or "other". Questions or advice posts were further classified as relating to medication, lifestyle, diagnosis or other. Since many data were classified "asking a question-other" or "providing advice- other", data from these posts were reexamined and clustered into new categories to better describe the post contents. For any questionable content, the reviewers discussed the issue with each other and consulted with JK.

Simple proportions were calculated to describe the categories. To protect the anonymity of online personas, approximations of illustrative quotes are used.

Results

One hundred eighty-eight publicly available asthma groups were found, but only 36 (19%) directly related to asthma. Only one main group page contained referenced clinical information. Of 317 forums reviewed, 62% (n=195) were asthma-related. The highest proportion of posts “shared a personal story” (42%, n=581), typically about diagnoses, triggers, problems and experiences. Many followed the format “I used to have really bad asthma until ...”

Fifteen percent of posts asked a question, and 5% provided advice. More than half of the questions and nearly half of the advice related to “other” asthma topics including alternative treatments, doctors, hospital visits and social situations. For example, “How do you cope with people who believe that asthma is all in your head?” or “If your doctor isn't listening to you, find another doctor for a second opinion.” Not all advice was medically appropriate. For example: “Cocaine helps my asthma. I'll snort a line and my breathing gets better.” Medication was also a popular topic, comprising 40% of questions and 38% of advice. An example of medication-related advice: “Always rinse and gargle after using Advair to avoid getting a mouth and throat infection.”

Finally, links found in posts were recorded and reviewed to describe their origin. Commercial websites (.com) made up 73% (n=36) of links, but only 40% (n = 18) of those were considered relevant to asthma.

Conclusions

Asthma special interest groups on MySpace contained questions, advice, and links to commercial websites, but little referenced clinical information. Many posts contained substantial misinformation. This is worrisome because adolescents increasingly obtain health care information from the internet rather than their providers [2]. Furthermore, adolescents are likely to use ‘trial and error’ search methods without considering the source of the information [3] on these unmoderated sites. The majority trust the information and 40% have changed their behavior as a result [4]. A related concern is that these unmoderated sites will promote riskier online behavior as has been demonstrated in other work [5]. This study is limited by lack of inter-rater reliability testing. Future studies are needed to determine why adolescents turn to the internet for health information. Since many youth access social networking sites and seek health information online, health professionals should seek to understand the information being shared in online forums.

Acknowledgments

This project was supported in part by Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center and the Charlotte R. Schmidlapp Center for Career Development of Women in Academic Pediatrics. All authors had full access to all the data in the study and take responsibility for the integrity of the data and accuracy of the analysis.

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Figure 1.
Organizational depiction of MySpace special interest groups and discussion forums.