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Profiling the silver surfers: Which older australians are using the internet?

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Abstract

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PROFILING THE SILVER SURFERS: WHICH OLDER AUSTRALIANS ARE USING THE INTERNET?

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As Australia's population ages more people will develop chronic diseases, increasing both the burden on the health care system and the need for ongoing self-management. The internet has great potential to provide self-management education; helping participants increase their quality of life. Internet interventions are relatively cheap, can easily be updated and can be revisited at a time and location suitable to the participant. However, little is known about the extent and nature of older Australians' use of the internet. This paper aims to describe the associations between internet use and health and other demographic variables amongst older Australians. A survey was mailed out to 9,000 adults, aged 55 years and over, across three regions NSW, randomly selected from the electoral roll (response rate = 46.8%). Just over half of the respondents reported using a computer to access the internet. The majority of internet users had been using the internet for more than five years, had high levels of comfort with use, and used the internet to obtain health information. The presence of some chronic diseases was associated with not using the internet, although having asthma, anxiety or sleep apnoea did not appear to reduce internet use. Internet users were more likely to be younger ($p=.000$); well educated ($p=.000$); have a higher household income ($p=.000$); and report good health ($p=.000$). However, there was no significant difference in internet use between male and female respondents as well as between those born in Australia and overseas. Internet interventions have the potential to reach older adults, although there is still a distinct digital divide between internet users and non-users, suggesting that such interventions should not be the sole method of self-management education for this age-group. However, it is likely that this divide will narrow as the baby boomers age.