Use of Personal Health Records Doubles to 7%

BY ANNE C. ZIEGER

While the use of personal health records is gaining popularity, still only 1 in 14 Americans report having used one, according to a survey of 1,849 patients.

About 7% of respondents to the survey sponsored by the California HealthCare Foundation said they used a personal health record (PHR), or 1 in 14 Americans.

That's more than double the 2.7% who reported using PHRs in a 2008 study conducted by the Markle Foundation.

Among the reasons cited by those who do not use a PHR were concern over the data privacy, the perception that they don't need such a tool, and fears that PHRs might cost too much or take up too much time, according to Sam Karp, vice president of programs for CHCF.

Fifty-five percent of respondents without a college degree reported that after using a PHR, they asked their provider questions they otherwise would not have asked.

Of those who reported PHR use, 26% reported using one sponsored by their health care provider while 51% reported using one provided by their health insurer.

While PHRs users tend to be young, highly educated white men with relatively high incomes, patients with chronic illnesses and those with lower-than-average income and educations were more likely to report benefiting from using a PHR, according to the survey results.

For example, 55% of respondents without a college degree reported that after using a PHR, they asked their provider questions they otherwise would not have asked.

Also, 58% of users with incomes of less than $50,000 said that they felt more connected to their doctors as a result of using a PHR.

Further, 40% of PHR-using respondents with two or more chronic conditions reported that they had taken steps to improve their health, the researchers said.

In addition to assisting patients in managing their health, PHRs can also serve as safety tools, said Dr. Kate Christensen, medical director, Internet services group for Kaiser Permanente.

Kaiser, which runs a PHR serving 3 million patients, has found that patients use it to check their medical data and e-mail providers to report errors.

Physicians and patients do experience a "learning curve" when they first use the Kaiser PHR, Dr. Christensen noted. However, the overall experience appears to offer a net benefit, she said.

"When you get there you find that your practice has changed, but that it's at a new level of productivity." ■

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