

## **“Dear internet – what should I do?” Swiss parents’ digital media behaviour when searching for information on children’s health.**

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### **Background**

Little is known on parental use of digital media when it comes to children’s health, although the potential of information that can be found online and on social media is steadily increasing. Our study aimed at understanding how parents use digital media to inform themselves on child health issues and how they assess the trustworthiness of information.

### **Methods**

A random birth registry sample of Swiss parents living in urban and rural communities with children aged 0 - 2.5 years was surveyed on their use of digital media. A standardized questionnaire was available online and on paper including socio-demographic characteristics, child and parental health items on utilization of digital media to access information about general health and acute health questions, as well as the European digital health literacy questionnaire (eHEALS).

A focus group was carried out to collect qualitative data on the topics of utilization, trustworthiness, barriers and interaction with physicians.

### **Results**

With a participation rate of 30% and an overrepresentation of highly educated parents, the sample consists of 842 parents (88% female, mean age 35.7 years, s.d. 4.3). The mean age of their youngest child was 14.7 months (s.d. 7.1).

Parents use digital media because they are available 24/7 (76%), because they are up to date (34%) and because of good experiences with information accessed online (34%). When searching for information on general health, results indicate that 92% of the parents use digital media. When searching information about acute health issues, 82% resort to digital media. With regard to general health, digital media are most often accessed for information on nutrition (24%), child development (20%) or regulatory disturbances (18%). When it comes to acute health issues, digital media are most often accessed to understand

symptoms or the relevance of an acute health problem (47%) and alternative medical treatment options (40%).

However, there exists a high level of insecurity with respect to trustworthiness of information available online: only 3% of the parents report to fully trust the information found online and 8% report to never verify its content. About half of the parents are aware that they do not understand the information. Qualitative data support these results: parents do not feel entirely safe to judge the information found online, so in the end they consult a physician, "*trusting*" his/her opinion better.

## **Conclusions**

Digital media have become a frequent information resource on child health issues for mothers and fathers. Online, parents search for general child health topics and specific therapeutic or diagnostic information. Parents are sceptic about the information they receive online and their comprehension.

Resonating with previous research on this topic in the U.S., the potential of gathering information online could be better exploited: parents could be empowered to be better able to navigate in the digital world and online information provided on child's health could be better validated or scientifically certified by corresponding stakeholders.