“Not as often as people who live in urban areas,” say Timothy Hale, LHC Scholar Patricia Drentea and colleagues. “Among individuals who have used the Internet, those in rural areas are less likely to use the Internet for health purposes. The persistence of a digital divide between rural and urban residents can be attributed to educational level, income, and less access to broadband Internet connections.”

Rural areas are medically underserved; there are fewer health care professionals, and rural patients travel farther to access health care. Use of the Internet can solve some problems of access to health care and health information for those in rural communities. By going online, individuals can find health information to help make important health care decisions, increase communication with health care providers and support groups, buy medical products, and increase contact with their social networks. The percentage of people in the U.S. who use a computer and the Internet has steadily increased over the past decade, but as of May 2008, 63% of rural individuals report Internet use compared to almost 77% of suburban and 73% of urban individuals.

Using data from the National Cancer Institute’s 2005 Health Information National Trends Survey, the researchers examined health-related Internet use. Overall, women are much more likely to make health-related use of the Internet and have more frequent use than men. Compared with those living in an urban residence, a rural residence is associated with a decrease in the odds of having looked for information about exercise (35%) or diet (29%) or doing anything else health-related online (32%). Broadband Internet access is associated with a 91% increase in the odds of using five or more health-related Internet uses.

“Broadband diffusion must go hand in hand with other changes in rural communities such as increased education and training,” say the researchers. “A multifaceted approach is vital to assist the ‘information disadvantaged’.”

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