Cancer Information Scanning and Seeking Behavior Is Associated with Knowledge, Lifestyle Choices, and Screening


The vast body of research on information exposure and cancer prevention and screening behaviors has focused on active seeking, such as searching the Internet for the answer to a specific question. Less is known about how less active information acquisition, obtained through routine media use, such as reading the newspaper or having a conversation with family and friends (called “scanning”), affects these behaviors. The results of this study suggest that individuals who scan or seek cancer information acquire knowledge, adopt healthy lifestyle behaviors, and are more likely to get screened for cancer.

This study used the National Cancer Institute’s Health Information National Trends Survey data to describe cancer-related scanning and seeking behavior and to assess its relationship with knowledge, lifestyle behavior, and screening. Scanning was operationalized as the amount of attention paid to health topics, and seeking was defined as looking for cancer information in the past year.

Researchers created a two-by-two typology of information scanning and seeking. The resulting typology included 41% low-scan/no-seekers; 30% high-scan/no-seekers; 10% low-scan/seekers, and 19% high-scan/seekers. Both scanning and seeking were significantly associated with knowledge about cancer (B=.36; B=.34) and lifestyle choices that may prevent cancer, including exercise and fruit and vegetable consumption (B=.15; B=.16) in multivariate analyses. Both scanning and seeking were associated with colonoscopy (OR = 1.38, for scanning and OR=1.44, for seeking) and with prostate cancer screening (OR=4.53, scanning; OR=10.01, seeking). Scanning was significantly associated with recent mammography (OR=1.46), but seeking was not. Data was cross-sectional, so causal claims about these associations await further research.

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