

Online Services as Sources of Health Information

Results of a Representative Population Survey

The majority of people in Germany use search engines, health portals, social media, and increasingly AI chatbots to seek information on health-related topics. Our representative population survey shows that women, younger people, and those with higher levels of education are especially likely to search health and medical issues online. However, many users of online services – particularly of social media – report that they had already felt misinformed. It is therefore not surprising that, according to our findings, almost all respondents consider quality assurance of health-related content to be important.

Background and Methodology

The search for digital health-related information has long become part of everyday life for most people. Whether it is about symptoms, questions regarding medications, or treatment options – search engines, social networks, and now increasingly AI-based chatbots are often consulted first. This development enhances access to knowledge but also entails risks: misleading information spreads quickly, the trustworthiness of sources is difficult to critically appraise, and

systematic structures to ensure information quality are lacking. Increasing amounts of false and misleading information can therefore pose a serious health risk to the population.

The Bertelsmann Stiftung is committed to creating an information ecosystem in which digital health-related content is reliable, non-discriminatory, user-friendly, and freely accessible – embedded in an open, inclusive, and secure environment built on trust and enabling informed decision-making. To this end, the Bertelsmann

Stiftung conducts analyses, brings experts together, and develops concrete solutions for shaping a fair and socially responsible digital future in healthcare.

A central base of this work are empirical data on how people actually use and evaluate online services for health-related questions. On behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung, the research institute forsa Gesellschaft für Sozialforschung und statistische Analysen mbH conducted a representative nationwide online survey among the German-speaking population on the topic: “The significance of online services as a source of health-related information.”

The survey was designed to determine how people in Germany use the internet to search for health-related and medical topics and what experiences they have had regarding the quality of information. In total, 2,002 German citizens aged 18 and older, selected by a systematic random process, were surveyed. The study was conducted in August 2025 within the framework of a representative online panel.

The results show that people in Germany frequently use various digital services such as platforms, search engines, or AI chatbots to answer their health-related questions. This reflects a reality that has long since gained global significance: online services have become a central point of reference for health-related questions – and at the same time, the survey reveals a strong desire for safety and quality assurance. Below, we present selected findings of the study.

Online Search for Health and Medical Topics

87 percent of respondents have searched online specifically for information on health-related or medical topics.

According to the survey, women tend to use online sources in general more often than men, and people with a higher formal education use them more frequently than those with lower educational levels. With increasing age, respondents are less likely to search online for health information. While 97 percent of those aged 18 to 29 search online for health information, this figure drops to 82 percent among those aged 60 and older (see Table 1).

Those who have searched online for health-related and medical information are especially interested in medications, medical conditions, symptoms, and self-treatment. The least frequently searched topics were contraception and addiction-related behavior (see Figure 1).

TABLE 1 Targeted online search for health and medical topics

Base: all respondents		
Percentage of respondents who have searched online specifically for information on health or medical topics		
total		87%
Men		83%
Women		91%
18–29 years		97%
30–39 years		91%
40–49 years		86%
50–59 years		85%
60 years and older		82%
formal level of education	low	77%
	medium	87%
	high	95%

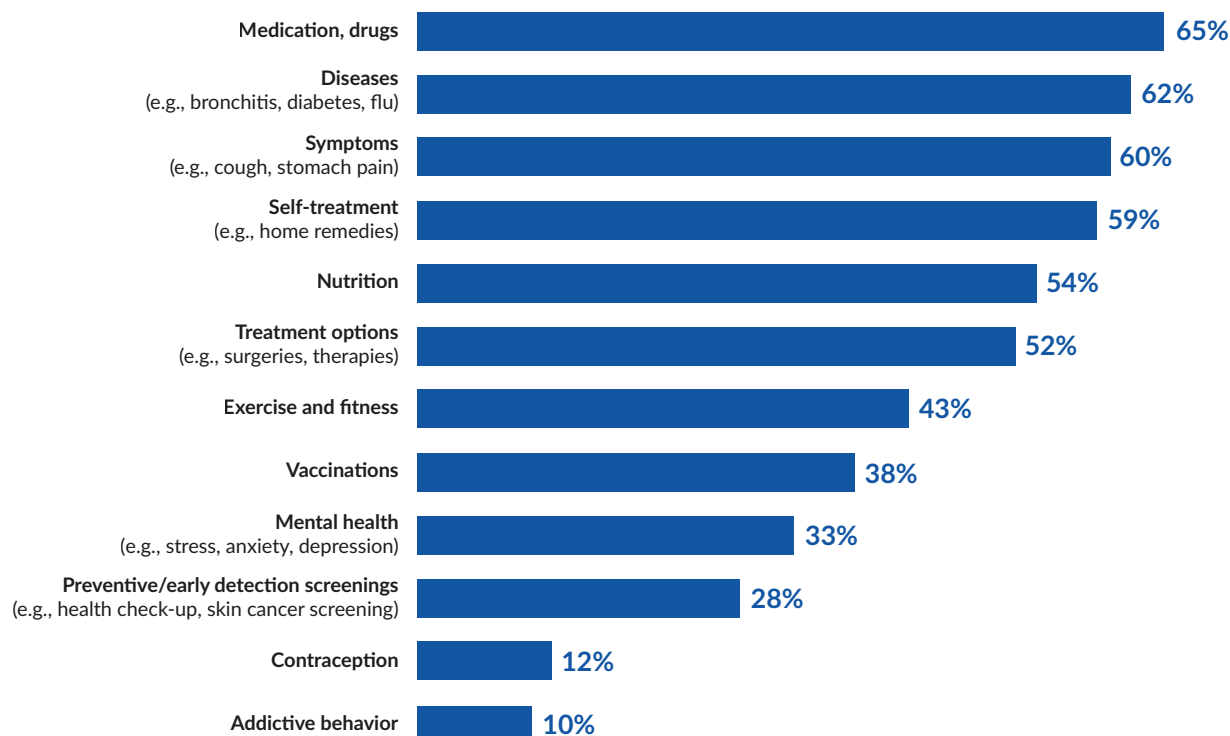
Source: forsa, survey August 2025, N=2002

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FIGURE 1 Topics searched for online

Base: Respondents who have already specifically searched online for information on health and medical topics

“Which health or medical topics have you already searched for online?”



Source: forsa, survey August 2025, n=1742; percentage sum exceeds 100 due to multiple responses possible

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Use of Online Services

As expected, different online services are very well known. Search engines (99 percent) and messaging services (93 percent) are familiar to almost all respondents.

Social media platforms (89 percent) – such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok – and German health portals (83 percent) – such as gesundheitsinformation.de, netdoktor.de, and apotheken-umschau.de – are also known by a large majority. 72 percent of respondents reported being familiar with AI chatbots such as ChatGPT, Perplexity, Copilot, or Gemini (see Figure 2).

However, mere awareness of digital offerings does not mean these services are used to search for health information. Here, notable differences emerge: Almost all respondents who are familiar with search engines also use them for health information searches (99 percent). Health portals also show a very high usage rate: 92 percent of those who know them use them specifically for health-related information. AI-supported chatbots rank third: among respondents who are aware of them, a clear majority (68 percent) also use them for health-related searches.

Messaging services (57 percent) and social media platforms (48 percent) are less frequently used, though still by about half of those familiar with them (see Figure 3).

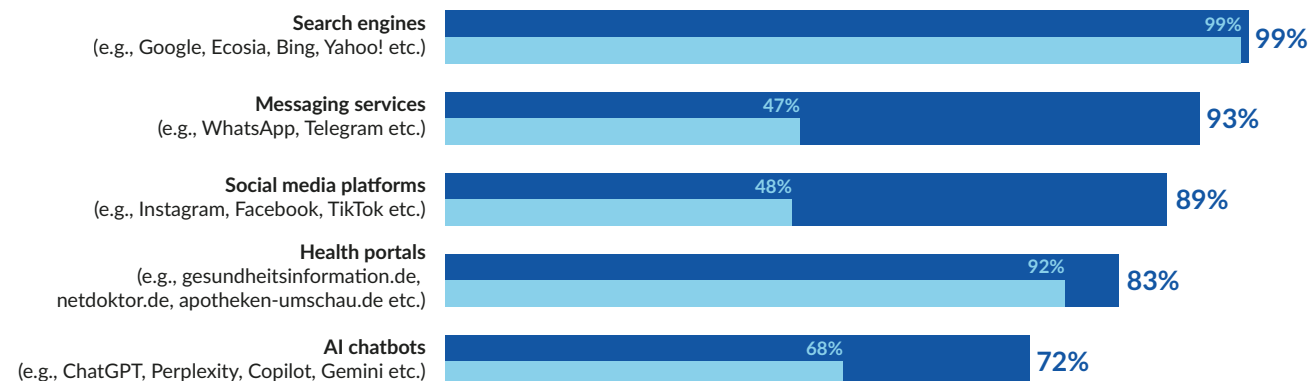
FIGURE 2 Awareness and use of online services

■ Online service is known.

Base: Respondents who have already specifically searched online for information on health and medical topics

■ Online service is used to search for information on health or medical topics (frequently, occasionally, rarely).

Base: Respondents who are familiar with the respective online service



Source: forsa, survey August 2025, n>1247

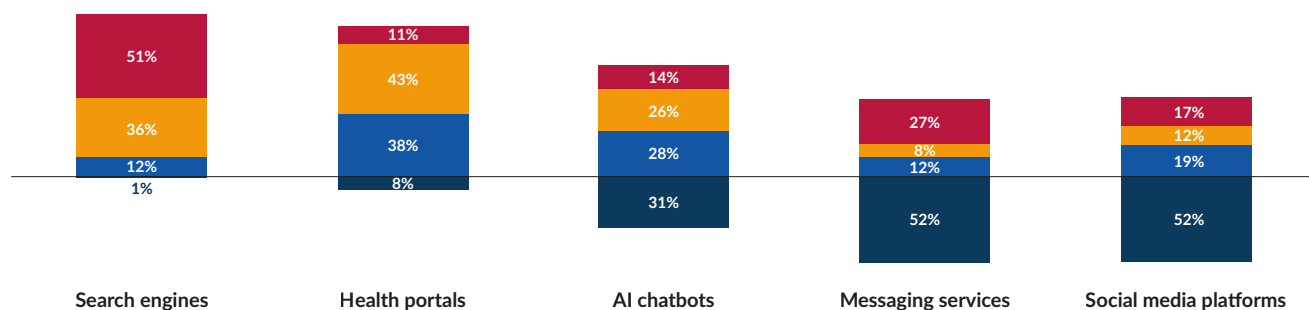
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FIGURE 3 Frequency of use of online services

Base: Respondents who are familiar with the respective online service

■ frequently ■ occasionally ■ rarely ■ never

“How often do you use the respective online services to search for information on health or medical topics?”



Source: forsa, survey August 2025, n>1247; Missing values: don't know/no answer

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Feeling Misinformed

Users of different online services were also asked how often they felt misinformed when searching for health-related or medical topics. Social media performed the worst: 59 percent of users said they had frequently or occasionally felt misinformed there. Search engines were rated somewhat better, but even here nearly half of respondents reported feeling occasionally (39 percent) or frequently (8 percent) misinformed.

Among users of AI chatbots, 41 percent, and among users of messaging services, 37 percent, reported feeling frequently or occasionally misinformed.

Health portals enjoy the highest level of trust: only just over one-quarter (26 percent) said they had felt frequently (3 percent) or occasionally (23 percent) misinformed there.

The comparatively high non-response rate (9–33 percent, see Figure 4) for this question points to a central problem and is consistent with empirical findings on the health literacy of the German population: many people find it difficult to assess whether the information they receive is correct and trustworthy (Schaeffer et al. 2025).

When considering results by gender, age, and educational level, certain patterns emerge: Respondents under the age of 30 more frequently feel misinformed about health-related topics on social media platforms (71 percent) and in messaging services (51 percent). In messaging services, more men (42 percent) than women (33 percent) report having encountered false

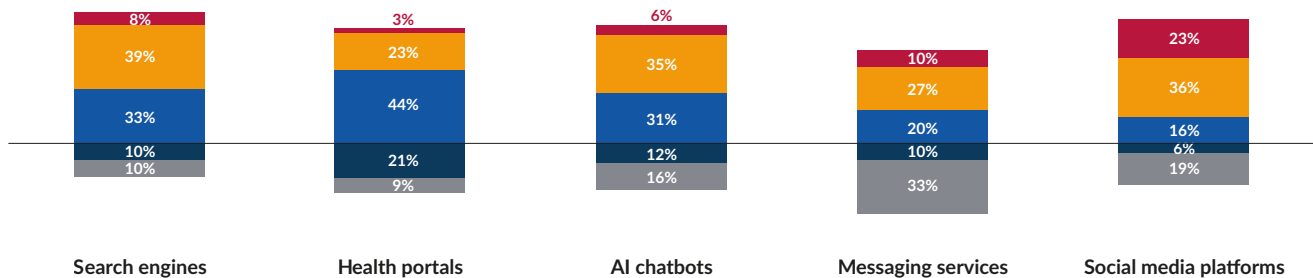
health-related information. People with higher levels of education are more likely to feel misinformed across all online services – with the exception of health portals, where the trend is reversed (see Table 2).

FIGURE 4 Feeling of being misinformed

Base: Respondents who use the respective online service at least rarely

■ frequently ■ occasionally ■ rarely ■ never ■ don't know/no idea

“How often have you felt misinformed by the following online services on health or medical topics?”



Source: forsa, survey August 2025, n>1247

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TABLE 2 Feeling misinformed by online services on health or medical topics

Base: Respondents who use the respective online service at least rarely

Percentage of respondents who have frequently or occasionally felt misinformed by the following online services regarding health-related or medical topics

		Social media platforms	Search engines	AI chatbots	Messaging services	Health portals
total		59%	47%	41%	37%	26%
Men		59%	47%	40%	42%	24%
Women		59%	47%	42%	33%	28%
18–29 years		71%	55%	47%	51%	20%
30–39 years		63%	54%	44%	33%	28%
40–49 years		62%	50%	41%	38%	30%
50–59 years		53%	48%	35%	42%	25%
60 years and older		50%	38%	35%	31%	28%
formal level of education	low	51%	42%	35%	32%	29%
	medium	60%	47%	39%	35%	27%
	high	63%	52%	44%	43%	24%

Source: forsa, survey August 2025, n>1247

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Desire for Quality Assurance

93 percent of all respondents consider it very or fairly important that health-related and medical content in online services be subject to quality assurance. This nearly unanimous agreement shows that people want reviewed, reliable content in the digital space (see Figure 5).

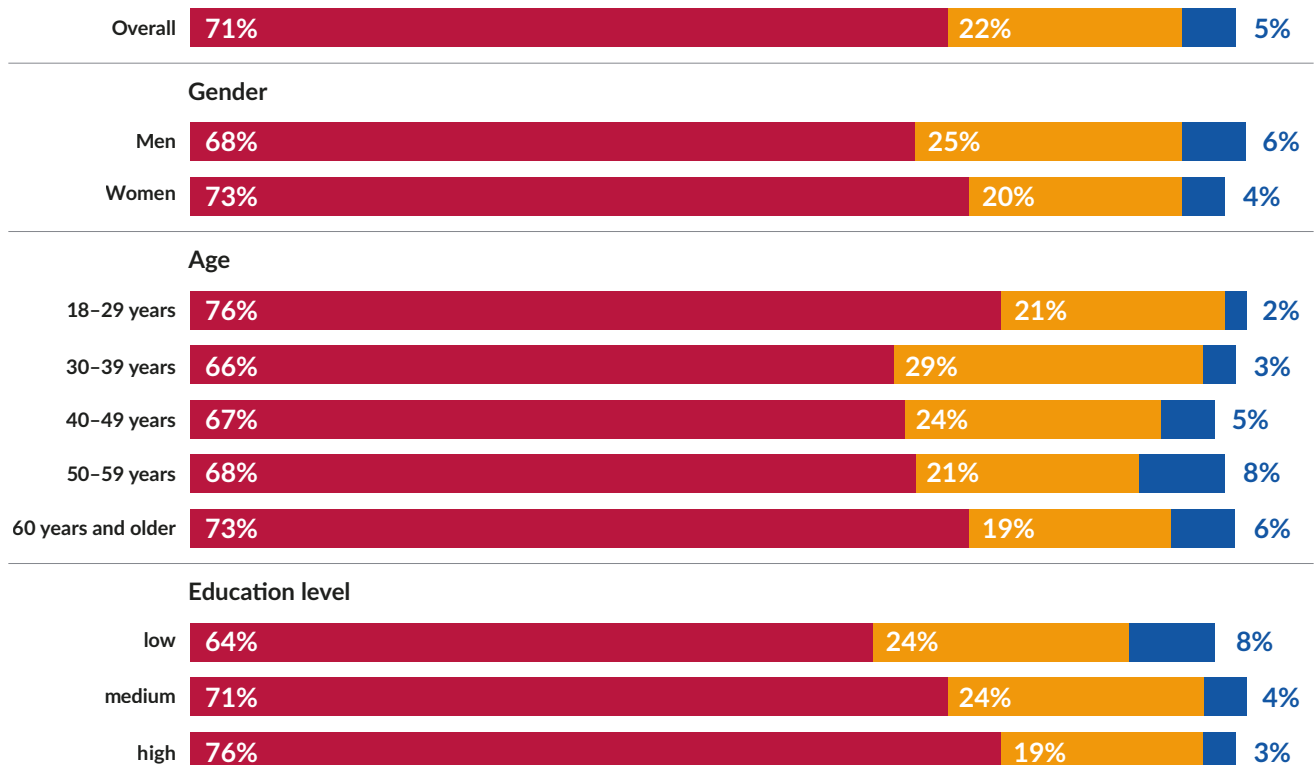
With regard to age and gender, no major differences appear. The proportion of respondents who consider quality assurance to be very important is highest among 18- to 29-year-olds (76 percent). In terms of education level, the higher the educational attainment, the greater the proportion of those who consider quality assurance to be very important.

FIGURE 5 Demand for quality assurance

Base: all respondents

■ very important ■ rather important ■ rather unimportant and unimportant

"In your opinion, how important is it that health and medical content on online services is subject to quality assurance?"



Source: forsa, survey August 2025, N=2002; Missing values: don't know/no answer

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Conclusion

The survey results make clear that online services play a central role in the search for health-related information. The proportion of people who specifically search for digital health-related information has risen significantly compared to earlier surveys, underscoring the growing importance of digital sources. Almost all respondents use search engines, health portals, and increasingly AI-based chatbots.

At the same time, misinformation in the digital space often generates distrust: while specialized health portals enjoy relatively high levels of trust and are rarely perceived as sources of misinformation, a majority feels at least occasionally misinformed on social media. AI-based chatbots and messaging services are also used by relevant user groups for health-related searches but are similarly associated with uncertainty regarding information quality.

This uncertainty is reflected in the near-unanimous support for systematic quality assurance of health-related content on digital platforms. The overwhelming approval highlights that people recognize the problem of unreliable digital information and desire a trustworthy, regulated information environment. A clear mandate for action emerges here: structures and mechanisms for quality assurance must be established, and safe spaces created in the digital realm where people can freely access reliable and trustworthy health-related information.

Reference

Schaeffer, D., Griesse, L., Singh, H., Ewers, M., Hurrelmann, K. (2025). Health literacy in times of societal uncertainty – Results of HLS-GER 3. Bielefeld: Interdisciplinary Center for Health Literacy Research (IZGK), Bielefeld University.

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