

HEALTH LINKS: WHO ACTS AS A SOURCE OF HEALTH INFORMATION IN A SOCIAL NETWORK?

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Background: Members of a social network can influence the preventive health choices and cancer screening behaviors of other network members.

Study Design: We conducted in-person interviews with 438 insured adults ages 40-70 in Massachusetts, Hawaii, and Georgia. We gathered information on social network communication regarding routine health topics and cancer screening. Participants reported whether family members and friends ask them for information or advice on health topics. Characteristics of each respondent's social network were explored, including number of people with whom the participant has discussed colorectal cancer (CRC) screening. Participants were asked whether communication with social network members had ever led them to seek cancer screening.

Principal Findings: 80% of respondents in our group described themselves as a source of health information or advice for others in their social network (89% of women vs. 68% of men, $p < 0.001$). Those who considered themselves information sources were more likely (94%) to have communicated with friends and family about CRC screening as compared to those who did not self-identify as sources (82%, $p < 0.05$). Respondents who self-identified as being a source of health information reported discussing CRC screening with more people in their social network (mean of 12.2 vs. 5.3 people) and knew more people who had undergone CRC screening via colonoscopy or sigmoidoscopy (6.1 vs 3.6 people). Twenty-four percent of all respondents reported having scheduled a cancer screening test or mentioned a test to their doctor due to communication with a friend or family member.

Conclusions: People who identified themselves as a source of health information within their social network were more likely to have discussed CRC screening with others and communicated with more people. Further study is necessary to understand the roles played by these individuals. As "health information ambassadors," they may be effective targets for interventions that promote preventive screening.