



From Search to Solution: The prognosis for self-diagnosis in the UK





“Digital health services are playing an increasingly prominent role in healthcare - and are likely to continue to do so in the years to come.”

Hear from Heather Smith, CEO AXA Health

Digital tools play an increasingly important and positive role in how healthcare is accessed and delivered, at a time when patients' routes into healthcare services are also becoming more complex. In this context, I am pleased to present the findings of AXA Health's new report 'From Search to Solution: The prognosis for self-diagnosis in the UK.'

The research paints an encouraging and nuanced picture of patients' diagnosis pathways and digital access to health information in the UK.

Our report shows a real appetite among the British public to take responsibility for their health and control how they access care. For many, this means turning to online health tools and resources for self-diagnosis to find answers more quickly, with trust being a key factor. Additionally, employers are becoming a trusted source for health information and support, with businesses taking a more active role in the health and wellbeing of their workforce. Ultimately, digital health services are playing an increasingly prominent role in healthcare - and are likely to continue to do so in the years to come.

Our research is clear that the majority of people want to continue benefiting from the health information that can be found online

to support self-diagnosis and improve their health and wellbeing in a responsible way. On the whole, patients are treating self-diagnosis as the first step in their healthcare journey rather than a final destination, following up with medical professionals where appropriate and necessary.

While there's a plethora of support and information available online, we should be wary of the dangers posed by potential misdiagnoses and misinformation, particularly for demographics such as those aged between 16-24, who commonly turn to social media for mental health diagnoses.

But patients also want to know that this information is accurate and support stronger regulation to guard against the dangers of misinformation.

Digital tools will remain an important part of healthcare in the UK in the future, however for the public to reap the full benefits of these tools, the system must work accurately and safely.

I hope that this report equips you with a fuller picture of self-diagnosis and how it impacts the future of healthcare in the UK.

A national snapshot of self-diagnosis

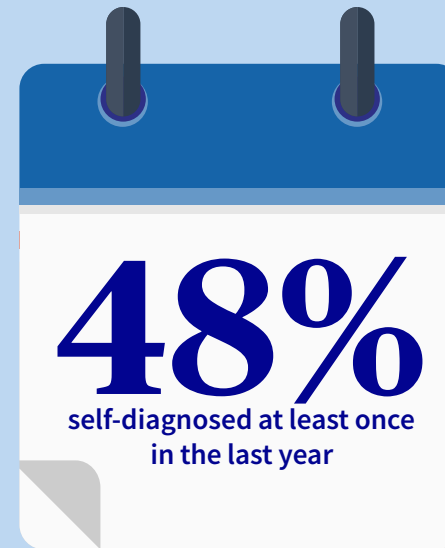
Who is self-diagnosing and how often?

Our research has found that self-diagnosis is prevalent in the UK across all demographics and regions. Nearly half of respondents (48%) surveyed have self-diagnosed at least once in the last year.

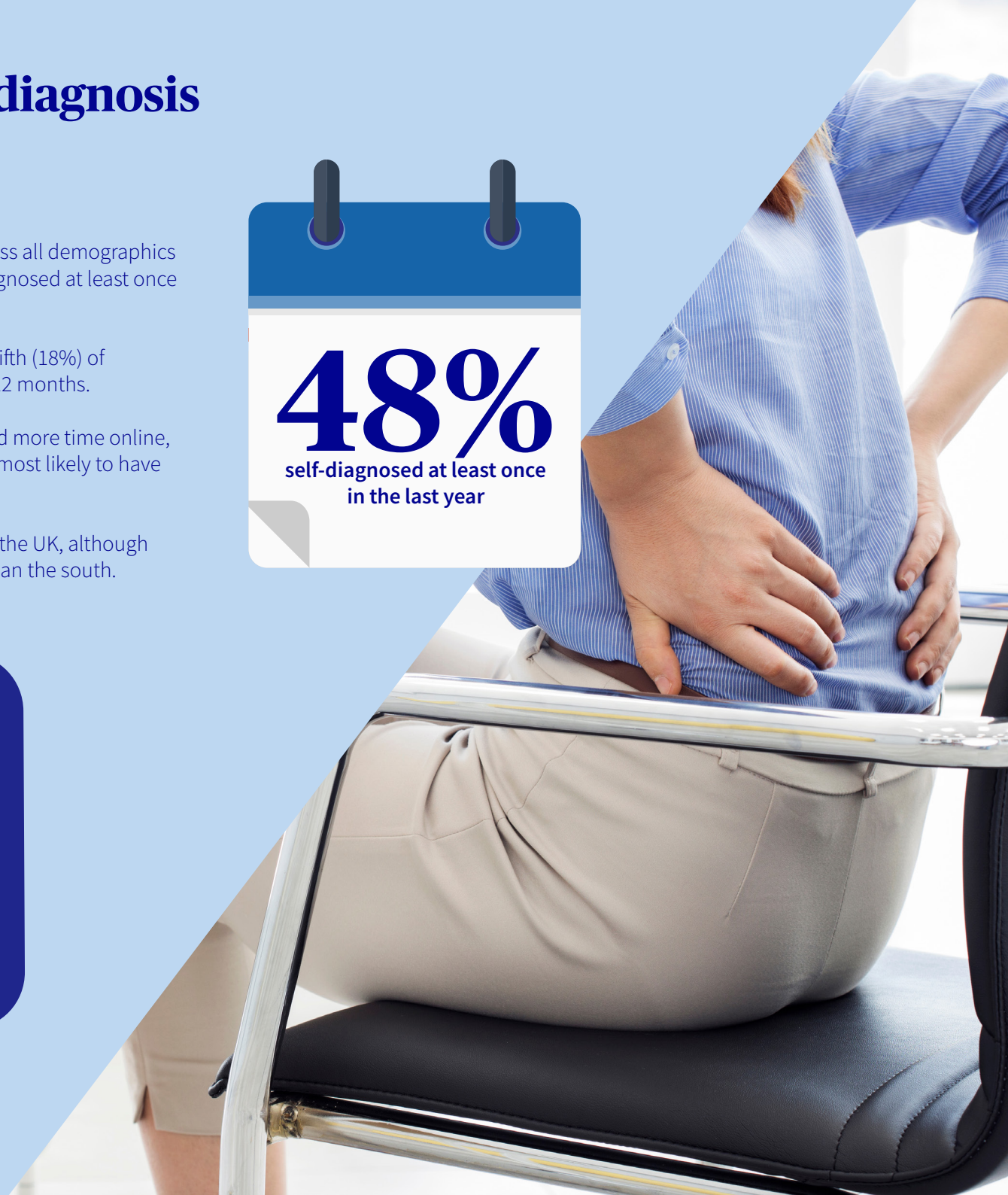
We're also seeing people self-diagnose multiple times, with nearly a fifth (18%) of 16-24-year-olds having self-diagnosed four times or more in the last 12 months.

While it might be expected that those aged 16-24, who typically spend more time online, would self-diagnose more frequently, 35-44-year-olds are in fact the most likely to have self-diagnosed a condition at 54%.

Regionally, there is little disparity in the rates of self-diagnosis across the UK, although rates of self-diagnosis are higher overall in the north of the country than the south.



Tracing the rise of self-diagnosis; “the process of diagnosing, or identifying, medical conditions in oneself”



What conditions are being self-diagnosed?

The types of conditions being self-diagnosed are not limited to any specific areas of health, with respondents using online health information to diagnose a range of conditions.

People are most commonly self-diagnosing minor ailments such as hay fever, sunburn and common colds (42%) and nearly a third (32%) have self-diagnosed a mental health condition, including depression, anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and eating disorders.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, a lot of emphasis was placed on the deteriorating mental health of the population, particularly young people. Four years later, the situation is yet to improve.

The rates of mental-health self-diagnosis are most acute among young people. 52% of those aged 16-24 who have self-diagnosed did so for a mental health condition – a stark disparity with older age groups (17%) but in line with the trend of declining mental health amongst young people.

Given the links between deteriorating mental health amongst young people and economic inactivity, accurate and faster access to information through digital health tools can provide an effective solution to tackling this head-on.

Interestingly, and contrary to concerns in recent media reports, we found no significant trend of social media fuelling a rise in the self-diagnosis of conditions such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism. Only 9% of people who have self-diagnosed did so for a neurodivergent condition.

52% of those aged 16-24 who have self-diagnosed did so for a mental health condition

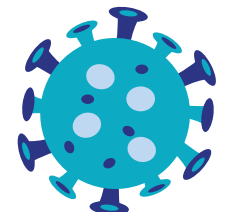
42% of people are most commonly self-diagnosing minor ailments



hay fever



sunburn



common colds

Symptom surfing – how are people self-diagnosing?

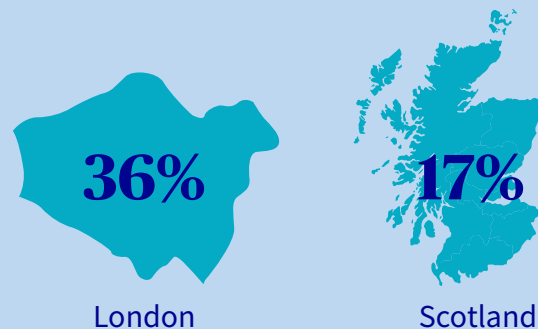
We live in a digital age where online platforms and social media provide information at rapid speed and this presents an opportunity for more timely access to information for patients.

We should be wary of the dangers posed by potential misdiagnoses and misinformation, particularly for demographics such as those aged between 16-24 who are more vulnerable to mental health challenges.

When asked about information sources for self-diagnosis, over half (55%) of respondents that have self-diagnosed in the last year relied upon the NHS website, followed by 40% on Google and 27% on symptom checkers (health technologies that enable patients to input their symptoms to produce a set of likely diagnoses and associated triage advice). The preference for using the NHS as an online tool suggests a strong desire from the public for verified health information from a trusted source.

Nearly a third (30%) of people self-diagnosed using social media, including TikTok, Instagram, X, Reddit and Facebook, and it's perhaps unsurprising that 15% of 16–24-year-olds sourced information on TikTok, compared to less than 1% of 55+ year olds. Interestingly, more than twice as many people used social media as a source of information for diagnosing a mental health condition (54%) than for a physical condition (20%).

There are also regional differences in how people self-diagnose. In Greater London, 36% use social media to self-diagnose versus 17% in Scotland.



Parallels can be drawn between rising health anxiety and increased social media usage, further underlining the need for policy and regulation to best protect those turning to the internet for health reassurance, diagnosis and accurate information. While the healthcare system is evolving to be more digital, social media doesn't always offer verified or regulated health information.

There is clearly a demand from younger people for mental health information and resources online, but it is crucial that this information is accurate and from reputable sources to reduce the risk of misinformation spreading or a misdiagnosis.

55% on the NHS website

40% on Google

27% on symptom checkers

A graphic of a smartphone with a white screen and a dark blue border. At the top of the screen are four circular profile icons. The main text on the screen reads '30% of people self-diagnosed using social media'. Below the text are icons for a heart, a speech bubble, and a paper plane. At the bottom of the screen are two more profile icons and some horizontal lines representing text.

30%
of people
self-diagnosed
using social media

The drivers of self-diagnosis

Why are people self-diagnosing?

The reasons why people choose to self-diagnose partly reflect the broader issues of barriers and access in our healthcare system with more and more people, turning to their peers or online resources for answers to their health queries.

While millions of people are in need of mental health and primary care services, national NHS waiting time targets are becoming increasingly difficult to meet.

Over a third (36%) say they have self-diagnosed because they are unable to get an NHS appointment in a timely manner and a further 22% voiced concerns over NHS waitlists.

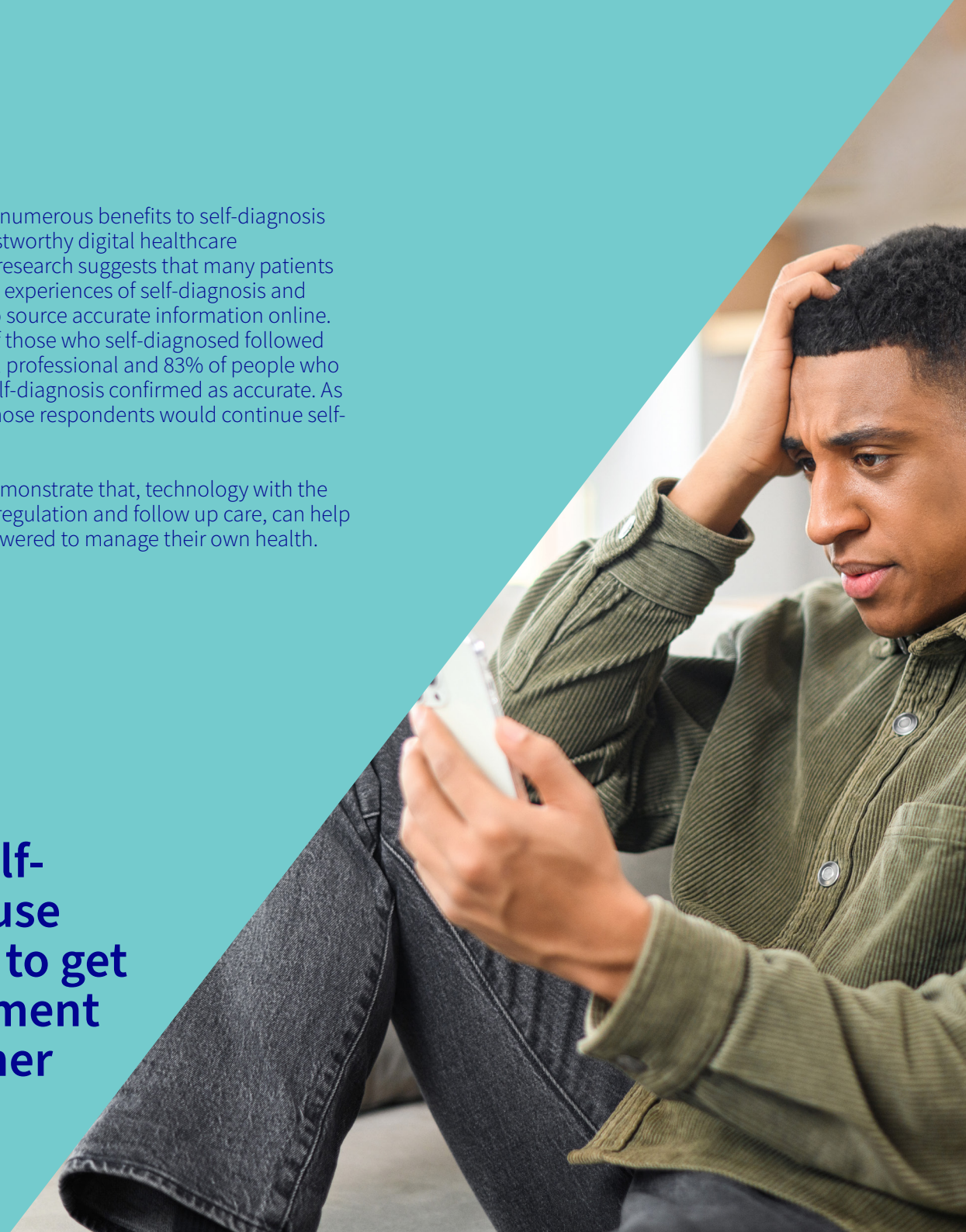
In addition, more than a fifth (21%) of people have self-diagnosed due to health anxiety (a factor that may be exacerbated by the prospect of long wait times), while almost 19% of people who have self-diagnosed a mental health condition did so because they lack faith in healthcare professionals.

Yet there are also numerous benefits to self-diagnosis and access to trustworthy digital healthcare information. Our research suggests that many patients have had positive experiences of self-diagnosis and have been able to source accurate information online. Over half (56%) of those who self-diagnosed followed up with a medical professional and 83% of people who did so, had the self-diagnosis confirmed as accurate. As a result, 62% of those respondents would continue self-diagnosing.

These findings demonstrate that, technology with the right safeguards, regulation and follow up care, can help people feel empowered to manage their own health.



say they have self-diagnosed because they are unable to get an NHS appointment in a timely manner



The economic and productivity impact of health anxiety:

We cannot overlook the inextricable link between health, economic inactivity and productivity.

Our research shows that 44% of men and 34% of women took 3-4 days off work due to a self-diagnosis. With record numbers of absenteeism (an ongoing pattern of not being present at work), it's clear that a solutions-driven approach to ill health is crucial to tackling economic inactivity.

Additionally, people are spending a high proportion of time feeling anxious about the health information they have found online and on social media. The UK average number of days spent feeling stressed or anxious about health information online is 54 – or almost two months of the year.

The research revealed that the time spent feeling anxious or stressed as a result of health information sourced online was an average of 78 days for respondents from London, followed by 61 days in the Northeast. The lowest average found was in Scotland (37 days). Those in Greater London also spend longer experiencing their symptoms before self-diagnosing (165 days), in contrast to 110 days for those in Scotland.

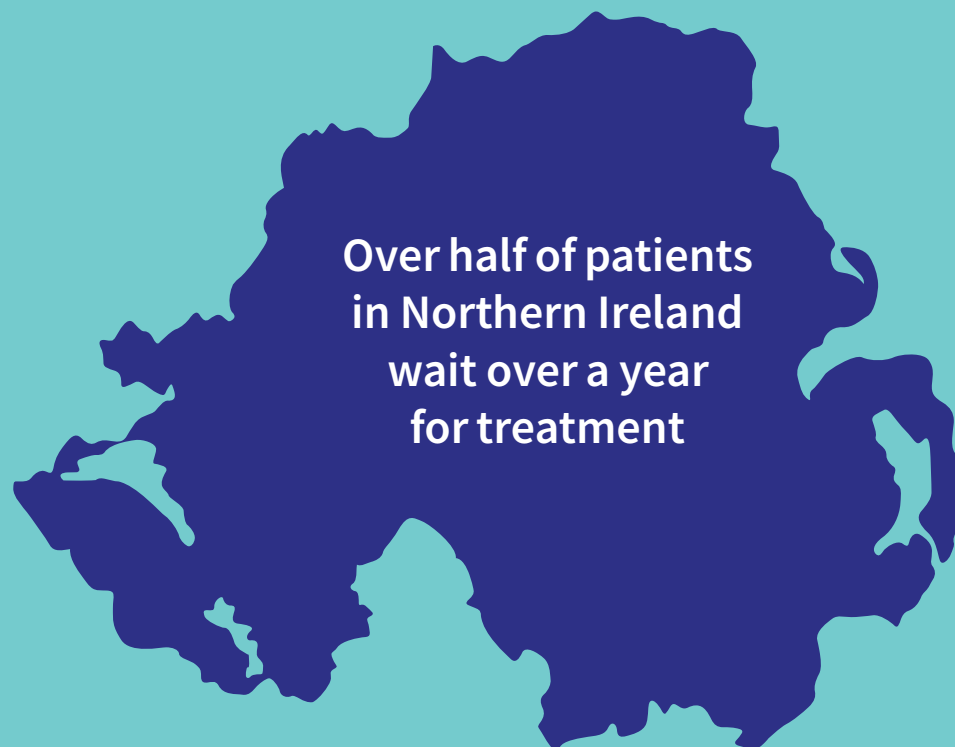
The triggers behind self-diagnoses also vary regionally. For instance, over half (54%) of respondents in Northern Ireland cited the difficulty in securing a timely NHS appointment as the reason they self-diagnose or have in the past. This is significantly more than in Wales (34%) and Scotland (48%).

Northern Ireland's health and social care system has likely contributed to patients looking elsewhere. In fact, over half of patients in Northern Ireland wait over a year for treatment.

In addition to days spent feeling stressed or anxious, nearly a third of respondents (31%) have incurred costs as a result of a self-diagnosis. This includes buying diagnostic tests, unnecessary medication and therapy costs, and for those aged between 16-24, that figure rises to more than half (50.19%). Digital health tools, when used appropriately and based on accurate information, have the potential to play an important role in improving access to healthcare, both for physical and mental health. However, implementing the right safeguards is necessary. By doing so, patients will feel empowered and supported by free, fast and accurate medical information.



44% of men & 34% of women took 3-4 days off work due to a self-diagnosis



Time for action

Risk and regulation online

While there is demand for online health sources and tools and the ways it can increase speed of access, patients are under no illusions about the potential risks involved with self-diagnosis.

Only 3% of respondents reported feeling reassured by health information shared online. This shows that despite a high proportion of self-diagnoses proving accurate, the majority of respondents don't feel supported by the current safeguards in place. More than three quarters (78%) of respondents believe there should be more regulation around health information online. It is disconcerting that over 42% agree that health information online isn't accurate but that they have no other option. Even following a self-diagnosis, nearly a third (31%) of respondents are most likely to follow up for more information online, despite acknowledging the information they've sourced could be inaccurate.

This has led to two-thirds (65%) experiencing stress at least once about the health information they've found online. GPs have also noticed the increase in health anxiety, as a result of this, with practices now inundated with appointments at a time when healthcare services, are already severely under pressure.

There was clear support amongst respondents for better regulation. Nearly half (49%) of respondents said they would feel reassured that health information online is accurate through verified accounts for medical professionals on social media, closely followed by 44% who want stricter guidelines on health content.

Additionally, more than a third of respondents are in favour of a health kite-mark certification (36%), which confirms that a product or service's claim has been independently and repeatedly tested by experts. 34% of respondents support mis-information red flags online to help users spot misleading content.

There are clear measures policymakers can implement to help ensure that health information online is safe and accurate. By doing so, people will feel empowered to spot the warning signs of inaccurate information. Through introducing systems where misleading content can be flagged, we can mitigate the risks of people following inaccurate health information, as well helping combat the further spread of this misinformation to peers.

78%

believe there should be more regulation around health information online.

44%

want stricter guidelines on health content.

49%

said they would feel reassured that health information online is accurate through verified accounts for medical professionals on social media.

Harnessing digital health interventions:

Our research underlines the potential of technology to empower people to better understand, manage and monitor their own health.

The common factor across every age group, gender and region is that barriers to care in our health system are the biggest driver of self-diagnoses.

Ultimately, people acknowledge that health information online may be inaccurate and relying on it as a means of diagnosing a condition is a risk, but they are still turning to digital health tools as a resource. There are also success stories, where people have found their diagnosis accurate.

Reducing waiting lists in the NHS and improving access to care are long-term issues that cannot be fixed overnight. We should acknowledge that the prevalence of self-diagnosis is likely to continue, so we must prioritise improving the information ecosystem that informs these self-diagnoses.

Better regulation of health information online, particularly on social media, should be a priority for policymakers.

Measures such as introducing verified accounts for medical professionals providing health advice on social media, stricter guidelines on health content, health kite-mark certification and mis-information red flags to help users spot misleading content all attract support from those who are self-diagnosing.

Undoubtedly, digital options will become increasingly important in healthcare, but there needs to be a strategy in place to ensure we get the very best out of digital tools, protect the public and improve overall health outcomes.

Introducing safeguarding regulation is key to this.



**AXA Health commissioned this survey via Censuswide in August 2024.
There were 4,000 UK respondents.**

