

Technology and older people: findings from the VicHealth Indicators Survey

Research highlights

Improving mental wellbeing

Introduction

Australia has an ageing population due to declining fertility rates and increasing life expectancy (ABS 2011). Older people (defined in these highlights as those aged 65 years and older) account for 13 per cent of the population and this is expected to increase to 20 per cent in 2050 (ABS 2011).

The majority (94 per cent) of older people in Australia live in private homes or self-care accommodation. One quarter of people aged 65 years and older live alone, increasing to just over half of those who are aged over 85. (AIHW 2011).

While old age is often associated with ill-health, older people are generally in better health than ever before, motivated to participate in and contribute to society. They also want to live independently at home for as long as possible.

This analysis looked at responses from 8,185 people aged 65 and above, taken from the VicHealth Indicators Survey of 25,000 Victorians conducted in 2012. The association between internet access, social networking and other health factors measured in the VicHealth Indicators Survey was also investigated. This research identifies the characteristics of older Victorians most likely to use digital technologies compared to those at risk of being socially excluded as a result of not having access.

Social connection

An often overlooked health problem associated with old age is isolation due to reduced mobility, disability, retirement, lack of access to transport or the loss of their partner. This can be a risk factor for depression and ill-health.

Staying socially connected by keeping in touch with family and friends is important for preventing social isolation. Digital technology provides useful ways, mainly through social networking sites, for older people to maintain contact with their family, friends and communities and to stay socially connected.

In addition, access to digital technology enables older people to source up-to-date health and local community news and information and may help older people to live at home independently for longer (Morris et al. 2012).

Internet access

As expected, younger Victorians were more likely to report having internet access at home. Over 90 per cent of Victorian adults aged between 18 and 54 reported internet access at home compared to 87 per cent of those aged 55 to 64 years, 70 per cent of those aged 65 to 74 and only 43 per cent of those aged 75 and over.

Age category	% of population with internet access at home
18-24	98
25-34	96
35-44	97
45-54	95
55-64	87
65-74	70
75+	43

Social networking to organise spending time with family and friends

Younger Victorians were more likely to use social networking sites, such as Facebook, instant messaging, blogs and photo sharing sites to organise spending time with their family and friends. The lowest rates of those using social networking sites for this purpose are from those aged 65 to 74 (9 per cent) and those aged 75 and older (5 per cent).

Age category	% use social networking to organise family and friend time
18-24	83
25-34	59
35-44	35
45-54	24
55-64	17
65-74	9
75+	5

Social networking facilitates more face to face time with friends

The age groups most likely to agree that social networking helped them to spend more face to face time with their friends were 18 to 24 years (71 per cent), 25 to 34 years (59 per cent), 65 to 74 years (53 per cent) and those aged 65 years and over (66 per cent).

Age category	% agree SN facilities face to face friend time
18–24	71
25–34	59
35–44	51
45–54	47
55–64	52
65–74	53
75+	66

Social networking facilitates more face to face time with family

The age groups most likely to agree that social networking helped them to spend more face to face time with their families were older. The highest agreement was by those aged 75 and over (66 per cent), those aged 65 to 74 (57 per cent) and those aged 55 to 64 years (54 per cent). In comparison, the lowest agreement was by the 18 to 24 year olds (35 per cent).

Older people are therefore the most likely to use and value social networking sites as a tool for connecting with their families.

Age category	% agree SN facilities face to face family time
18–24	35
25–34	39
35–44	40
45–54	40
55–64	54
65–74	57
75+	66

Internet access and wellbeing

The VicHealth Indicators Survey measured wellbeing using the Australian Unity Personal Wellbeing Index. Mean wellbeing was presented on a scale from 0–100. Overall, Victorians had a mean wellbeing score of 77.5. Older Victorians had a mean wellbeing score of 79, whilst those aged 18 to 64 had a mean wellbeing score of 77.

In Victoria, older people who reported a higher than average wellbeing score were also more likely to have internet access at home, compared to those with below average wellbeing scores (64 per cent versus 58 per cent).

Technology and community engagement

Being involved in one's community can alleviate social isolation and improve general health (Cornwell & Waite 2009). The VicHealth Indicators Survey measured volunteering and participation in citizen engagement, including activities such as attending a town meeting, joining a protest or demonstration, or signing a petition.

Older people in Victoria who have internet access at home were more likely to participate in their community than those without (71 per cent versus 29 per cent). Those who use social networking to organise spending time with their family and friends were also more likely to have participated in at least one community activity in the past year (56 per cent versus 44 per cent).

Volunteering rates were also higher for older people who had internet access at home (70 per cent) than volunteering rates for those without internet access (30 per cent).

Technology and safety

Feeling safe at home is an important determinant of health and wellbeing. Safety is linked to social connection and trust of one's community (Baum et al. 2009).

Older Victorians who reported feeling unsafe in their home when they are alone during the day were also more likely to be without internet access (67 per cent) compared to those with internet access (33 per cent).

Similarly, 59 per cent of older Victorians who reported feeling unsafe at home alone at night had no internet access, compared to 41 per cent with internet access.

Technology and language spoken at home

Around two-thirds (64 per cent) of older Victorians who speak English as their first language have internet access at home, compared to only 26 per cent of those who speak a language other than English when they are home.

Technology and geography

City dwellers appeared more connected than regional Victorians, with 64 per cent of older metropolitan residents having access to the internet, compared to 56 per cent who live in regional Victoria.

Technology and income

Having internet access at home is strongly associated with income. Over 87 per cent of older Victorians who earn more than \$59,000 per year have access, with the highest level reported by those earning \$120,000 or more per year (92 per cent).

Less than half of older Victorians who earn less than \$20,000 per year have the internet at home.

Annual income	% of population with internet access
Less than \$10K	44
\$10K-\$19K	41
\$20K-\$39K	58
\$40K-\$59K	78
\$60K-\$79K	90
\$80K-\$99K	87
\$100-\$119K	81
\$120K plus	92

Conclusions

Older Victorians report the lowest levels of internet access at home and the lowest use of social networking. However they are the most likely to reap the health and wellbeing benefits of social networking. People aged 65 years and over are using the internet as a vital lifeline to staying connected to family.

Older Victorians engaging with technology are also more likely to:

- volunteer
- participate in citizen engagement activities
- live in metropolitan or growth suburb areas
- have higher than average wellbeing
- report a higher annual income
- speak English in their home.

Lack of internet access is particularly problematic for those with lower incomes, who live in regional Victoria and who mainly speak languages other than English. These older people are likely to be less socially connected and less engaged in their communities and are therefore at risk of isolation and depression due to their lack of digital connectivity.

By far the most significant driver of the digital divide is cost. While a select few of Australia's major Internet Service Providers (ISPs) offer discounts for pensioners, VicHealth is advocating for all ISPs to offer a reduced rate on broadband to people aged 65 years and over, as many currently do on home telephone services. This would make the internet more accessible for senior citizens and demonstrate corporate social responsibility.

Technology needs to be specifically designed to meet the needs of older people: touch screens with large text and icons, and devices that are simple to operate can encourage older people to learn to use new programs (Vetere et al. 2012). Involving older people in the design of digital technologies can also ensure they are user-friendly, intuitive and meet their specific needs.

It's important to promote the multiple health and wellbeing benefits of technology to older people and empower them to adopt new technologies by making them more accessible and easy to use.

For more information on the VicHealth Indicators Survey, visit www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/Research/VicHealth-Indicators.

References

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