



How Americans Search for Health Information in the Age of AI

What your patients are actually doing online — and what it means for your hospital

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*in = 500 U.S. adults | Year-over-year comparison to September 2025 (n = 1,000)
This report was written with the assistance of Claude and ChatGPT.*

The big picture

We asked consumers about their use of and trust in AI search for healthcare information. We ran this survey in September 2025 and again in March 2026. In just 6 months, something shifted.

Americans are using AI more to find health information. But they trust it less. They want a human in the loop. And they're getting harder to reach — even through channels that used to work.

That's the story behind our latest survey.

We asked 500 people how they search for health information, what they trust, and how they feel about AI's growing role in healthcare. Then we compared those results with our September 2025 survey of 1,000 U.S. adults. Throughout this report, we highlight shifts of 5 percentage points or more with this symbol: ⚠️

These findings matter for anyone marketing a hospital, health system, or healthcare brand. But they also matter for anyone making decisions about their health, which is most of us.

5 things hospital marketers need to act on right now:

1. Your content needs to show up where patients are searching — and that now includes ChatGPT and Gemini, not just Google.
2. Appearing in Google's AI Overview is not enough. 89% of people cannot recall a single brand name they saw there. You need channels that build memory.
3. Lead every AI-assisted experience with a human. Consumer comfort with fully autonomous AI in healthcare dropped sharply across nearly every use case.
4. If you use AI to create or personalize content, say so. The authenticity of hospitals that use AI for communication fell by 10 points — largely because people are uncertain about it.
5. Center your marketing around your physicians. They are the most trusted entity in all of healthcare — by a wide margin.

The comfort retreat: AI's role in healthcare is being reconsidered

This is the biggest story in the entire report. Across 14 specific healthcare interactions, tolerance for AI use dropped consistently and significantly in just 6 months.

Survey question: What level of comfort do you have with AI's involvement in each of these healthcare interactions?

1. Not comfortable with AI's involvement
2. AI provides input to final human decision
3. Fully AI is acceptable

Declines in AI acceptability

| Healthcare interaction | 2025 | 2026 | Change |
|--|------|------|-----------|
| Sending reminders (screenings, Rx refills) | 43% | 30% | -13 pts ⚠ |
| Call center routing | 36% | 24% | -12 pts ⚠ |
| Creating advertising | 37% | 27% | -10 pts ⚠ |
| Website: medical conditions content | 32% | 22% | -10 pts ⚠ |
| Searching for a physician online | 31% | 21% | -10 pts ⚠ |
| Website: non-clinical questions | 38% | 29% | -9 pts ⚠ |
| Interpreting a self-assessment | 25% | 17% | -8 pts ⚠ |
| Website: answering clinical questions | 26% | 19% | -7 pts ⚠ |
| Website: test/procedure explanations | 28% | 23% | -5 pts ⚠ |
| Transcriptions of physicians' notes | 28% | 23% | -5 pts ⚠ |

Same question:

- 1. Not comfortable with AI's involvement
- 2. AI provides input to final human decision
- 3. Fully AI is acceptable

Increases in AI discomfort

| Healthcare interaction | 2025 | 2026 | Change |
|---------------------------------------|------|------|-----------|
| Website: non-clinical questions | 26% | 37% | +11 pts ⚠ |
| Creating advertising | 30% | 40% | +10 pts ⚠ |
| Interpreting a self-assessment | 36% | 45% | +9 pts ⚠ |
| Website: medical conditions content | 30% | 38% | +8 pts ⚠ |
| Sending reminders | 26% | 34% | +8 pts ⚠ |
| Transcriptions of physicians' notes | 35% | 42% | +7 pts ⚠ |
| Call center routing | 29% | 36% | +7 pts ⚠ |
| Website: answering clinical questions | 33% | 39% | +6 pts ⚠ |
| Diagnosing a routine illness | 40% | 46% | +6 pts ⚠ |
| Customizing treatments | 42% | 48% | +6 pts ⚠ |

People's comfort shifted — not away from AI entirely, but toward AI-assisted human decision-making. The “AI provides input to a final human decision” answer grew for call center routing (+6 pts, to 41%), physician searching (+6 pts, to 41%), and sending reminders (+5 pts, to 36%).

The AI use cases with the highest consumer acceptance are logistical, not clinical:

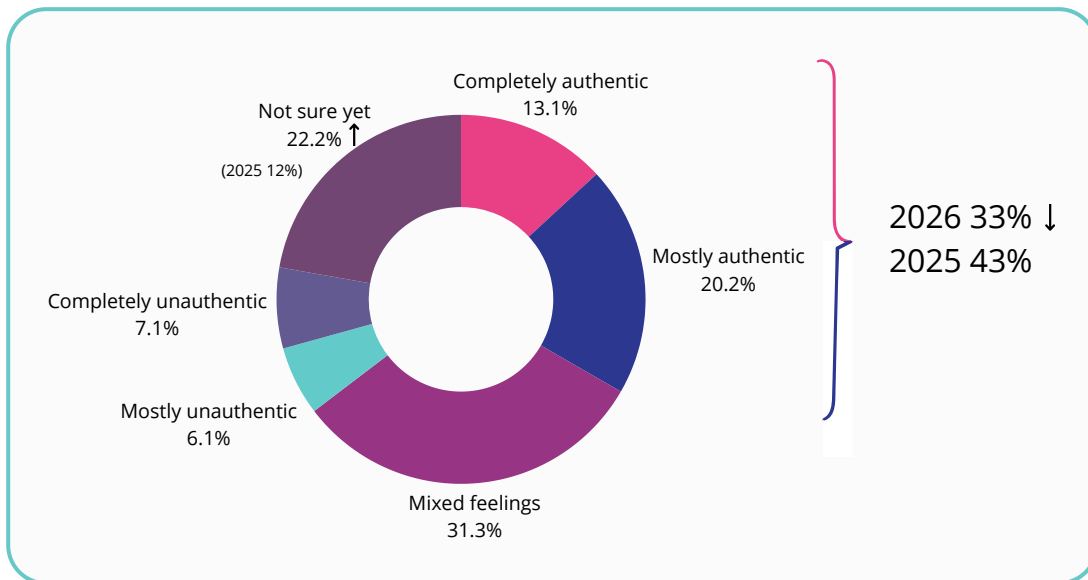
- Sending reminders for screenings/Rx refills: 30% fully acceptable (though down 13 pts)
- Answering non-clinical website questions: 29% fully acceptable (down 9 pts)
- Creating advertising: 27% fully acceptable (down 10 pts)

Tasks that remain off-limits for most people:

- Diagnosing a serious or complex illness: 52% not comfortable
- Customizing treatments based on health and genetics: 48% not comfortable
- Diagnosing a routine illness: 46% not comfortable
- Interpreting a self-assessment: 45% not comfortable

Some of the biggest swings we saw were around content creation. 10- to 11-point swings for creating advertisements and writing website content using AI. Consumers want a human in the loop, and they want to hear from you, not your AI content generator.

Hospital AI-use authenticity: a 10-point drop



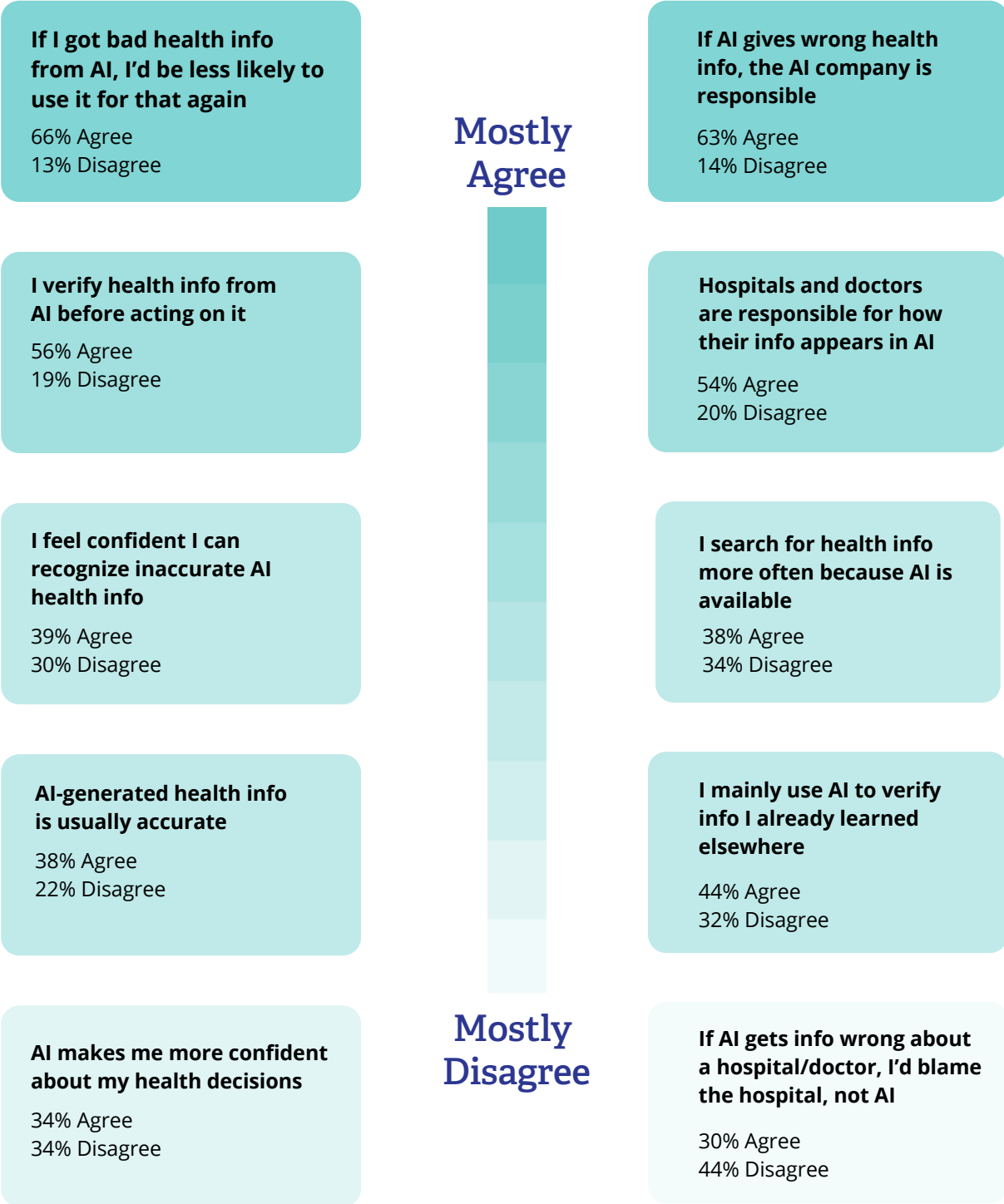
Survey question: How authentic is a hospital or health system that uses AI to fine-tune its communications with patients, whether on the website or in its advertising?

- Completely authentic: 19% → 13% (-6 pts ⚠️)
- Mostly authentic: 24% → 20%
- Mixed feelings: 28% → 31%
- Mostly or completely inauthentic: 17% → 13%
- Don't know enough yet to have a feeling: 12% → 22% (+10 pts ⚠️)

Consumers are not completely turning against AI-powered hospital communications — but they are becoming more wary of it. Authenticity is shrinking, and so is trust.

How Americans actually feel about AI and health information

This year, we added a new 10-statement section asking consumers to agree or disagree with specific attitudes about AI and health information. Results ranked by % agree:



What this tells us about accountability

- 63% hold the AI company responsible for incorrect health information.
- 54% also say hospitals and doctors are responsible for how their information appears in AI search results.
- Only 30% would blame the hospital or doctor specifically if AI gave wrong information about them — and 44% explicitly disagree with that.

Consumers expect both AI companies and healthcare organizations to get this right. But the blame primarily falls on the AI company, not the hospital. The reputational risk for hospitals from AI errors may be lower than feared — but the expectation to actively manage AI presence is clearly there.

56% say they verify AI health info before acting on it.

But 61% don't feel confident that they can identify inaccurate health info, so they wouldn't think to check it.

People believe they are checking. Many of them cannot tell when they need to.

AI vs. the doctor: Skepticism is hardening

We asked whether consumers agreed or disagreed that AI is more accurate than a doctor at diagnosing disease. The top-line numbers look similar to 2025 — but the intensity has shifted.

| Response | 2026 | 2025 | Change |
|-------------------|------|------|-----------|
| Strongly disagree | 39% | 31% | +8 pts ⚠️ |
| Somewhat disagree | 16% | 22% | -6 pts ⚠️ |
| Neutral | 26% | 25% | Flat |
| Somewhat agree | 13% | 13% | Flat |
| Strongly agree | 7% | 10% | -3 pts |

The disagree camp did not grow much overall (55% vs. 53%). But those who disagreed moved from “somewhat” to “strongly.” Skepticism is intensifying.

The brand visibility problem: 89% can't remember

89% of consumers could not recall a single brand or hospital name they saw in Google's AI Overview

That is up from 76% in 2025 — a significant 13-point increase. Appearing in the AI Overview is not translating into brand memory.

Among the 15% who recalled something, most were false recollections of big names like Mayo Clinic and Cleveland Clinic. This further exposes the importance of brand building.

But low recall does not mean low impact.

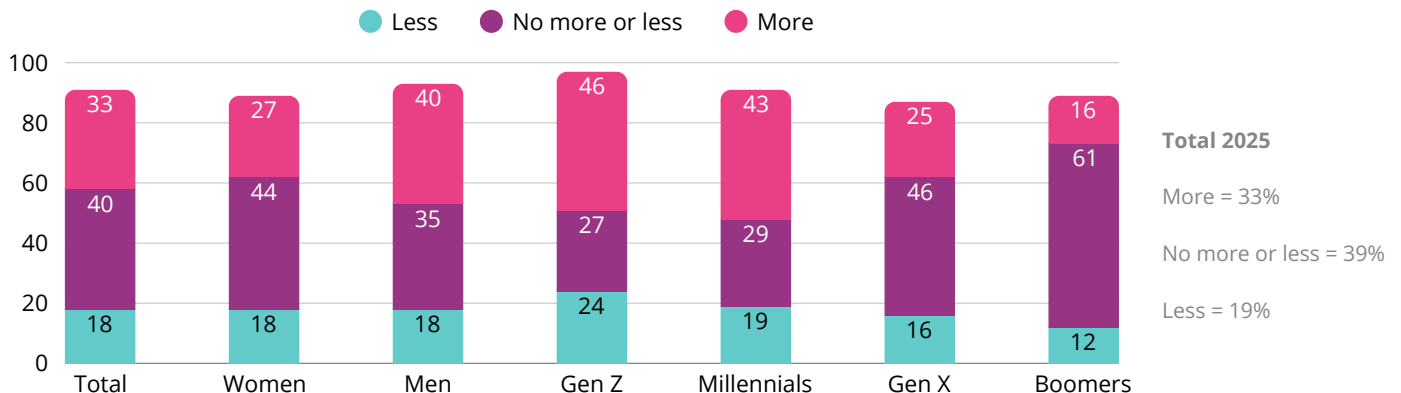
What happens when someone recognizes your hospital in an AI Overview?

- 41% would visit the hospital's website to learn more.
- 22% would trust the content that showed up, down from 27% (-5 pts ⚠).
- 21% would consider them more as a potential future patient.
- 15% said it would not change their opinion or behavior.
- 20% were not sure, up from 13% (+7 pts ⚠).

Plus, appearing in the AI Overview increases trust

- Especially for young people and men, where trust has gone up since last year
- Gen X and boomers move more toward neutrality
- Total trust held steady since 2025

Survey question: How much more or less do you trust a hospital that appears in the AI Overview compared to one in a traditional Google result?



The search tool landscape is changing fast

Google is still where most health searches begin — 73% of consumers use it for health-related searches. The bigger story is what is rising.

AI chatbots are becoming health search tools

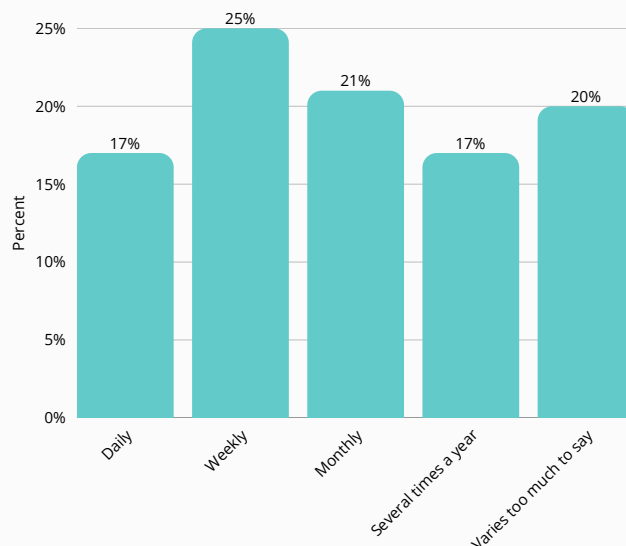
ChatGPT use for health searches jumped from 35% to 40% — a 5-point increase. Gemini climbed even faster, from 25% to 32%, a 7-point gain.

| Tool | 2025 | 2026 | Change |
|-----------------------|------|------|-----------|
| Regular Google search | 76% | 73% | -3 pts |
| ChatGPT | 35% | 40% | +5 pts ⚠️ |
| Gemini | 25% | 32% | +7 pts ⚠️ |
| Google AI Mode | 32% | 32% | Flat |
| Siri | 35% | 28% | -7 pts ⚠️ |
| Amazon Alexa | 32% | 27% | -5 pts ⚠️ |
| Copilot | 17% | 13% | -4 pts |
| Claude | 9% | 9% | Flat |
| Perplexity | 9% | 7% | -2 pts |

What else shifted?

- Siri dropped 7 points (35% → 28%). Alexa fell 5 points (32% → 27%). Voice assistants are losing ground to text-based AI.
- Copilot declined 4 points. Claude and Perplexity held steady.
- 17% search for health information daily; 18% search several times a week. This is high-frequency behavior.

How often do you search online for health-related information?



What tools did people use in the last 3 months?

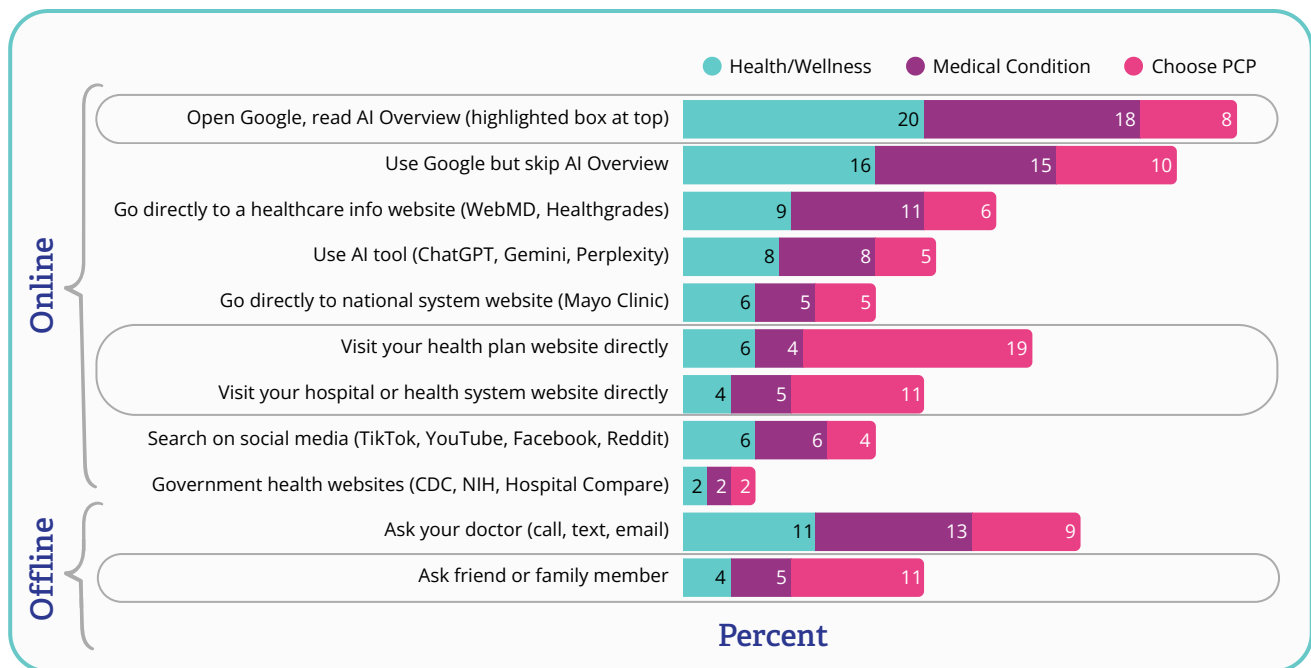
Reported behavior (not just intent) shows traditional sources losing ground while AI holds flat:

- Search engines for general health info: 31%, down from 37% (-6 pts ⚠)
- WebMD/Healthgrades for general health: 18%, down from 24% (-6 pts ⚠)
- WebMD/Healthgrades for medical conditions: 18%, down from 26% (-8 pts ⚠)
- Government health websites for general health: 7%, down from 12% (-5 pts ⚠)
- Hospital/health system websites for finding a doctor: 13%, down from 18% (-5 pts ⚠)
- AI chatbots and Google AI Mode each held flat at 17% to 19%.

The story is not that AI usage is exploding — it's that traditional sources are losing ground while AI holds steady. People are consolidating the places where they search rather than adding more options.

How people start a health search

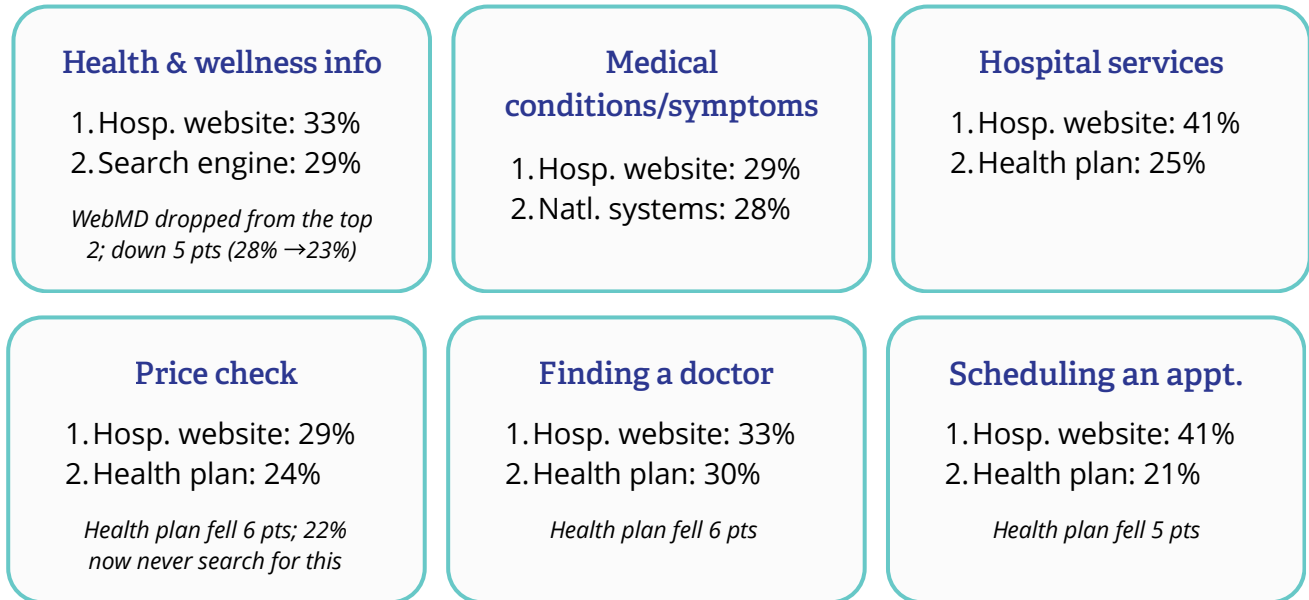
Where people begin depends entirely on what they're looking for. The paths diverge sharply between "I want to understand something" and "I need a doctor."



For physician searches, AI search drops. Word of mouth and directories dominate.

Where people go when it really matters

Trust in where to go for health information depends heavily on the task. The table below shows the top 2 most trusted destinations for each, with year-over-year change.



Key pattern: Confidence in health plan websites is declining across every task type. Hospital websites hold or gain ground for scheduling.

DIY health research: who people turn to

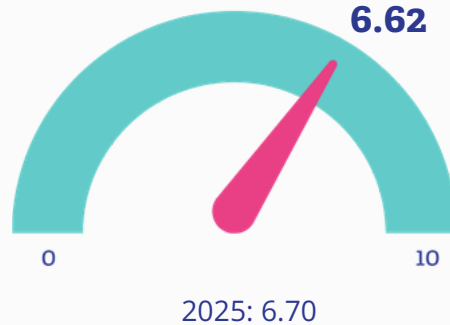
When treating symptoms at home:

- 24% call the doctor instead of searching online (up from 20%).
- 18% trust branded health plan websites most.
- 17% trust AI-generated answers.
- 15% trust branded hospital websites.
- 14% trust medical journals or government sites.
- 10% trust social media.

Comparing hospitals online: peer reviews still lead

- Consumer-driven review sites (Google Reviews, Yelp, Vitals): 30%
- Quality ranking organizations (U.S. News & World Report): 23%
- AI-chosen result (new option in 2026): 15%
- None of these would be useful: 20%

Average trust score AI Overviews: 6.62 out of 10



Down from 6.70 in 6 months. 41% give it a high score (8-10), down from 44%.

Trust in the AI Overview has softened slightly

Confidence in sources is slipping

- 44% were mostly or completely confident AI Overview answers came from credible sources (down from 47%).
- 31% were somewhat confident. 8% were not sure (up from 5%).
- "AI picks sources for quality": 36%, down from 41% (-5 pts ⚠).
- "Not sure" how sources are selected: 42%, up from 37% (-5 pts ⚠).
- "Those are paid/sponsored results": 22% (flat).

Source-clicking behavior

- 42% often click on 1 or more sources, down from 46%.
- 36% give them a quick look but don't click (flat).
- 13% don't even notice them (flat).
- 10% said "not sure" about their own clicking behavior, up from 5% (-5 pts ⚠).

Google's AI Overviews: growing presence, uncertain trust

Google's AI Overviews are part of how many Americans navigate health search. But users are growing more uncertain about it, not more confident.

Awareness and behavior

- 69% knew the top Google result is often AI-generated. 21% did not. 9% were not sure.
- 37% trust and read the AI Overview (down from 40% in 2025).
- 33% prefer to scroll past it to traditional results.
- 16% did not realize AI Overviews were different from regular results — these users are consuming AI-generated health information without knowing it.

We can no longer treat AI search and Google search as different. According to BrightEdge, an estimated 89% of all healthcare keywords result in an AI Overview — especially for clinical questions, which have 93%-100% AI Overview coverage. **For healthcare, Google search is AI search.**

A note on trust

Humans and AI engines approach trust very differently.

People are emotional decision-makers who want empathy and the comfort of knowing someone else has been in their shoes. AI is a rational fact-finder, crawling for structured, verifiable data.

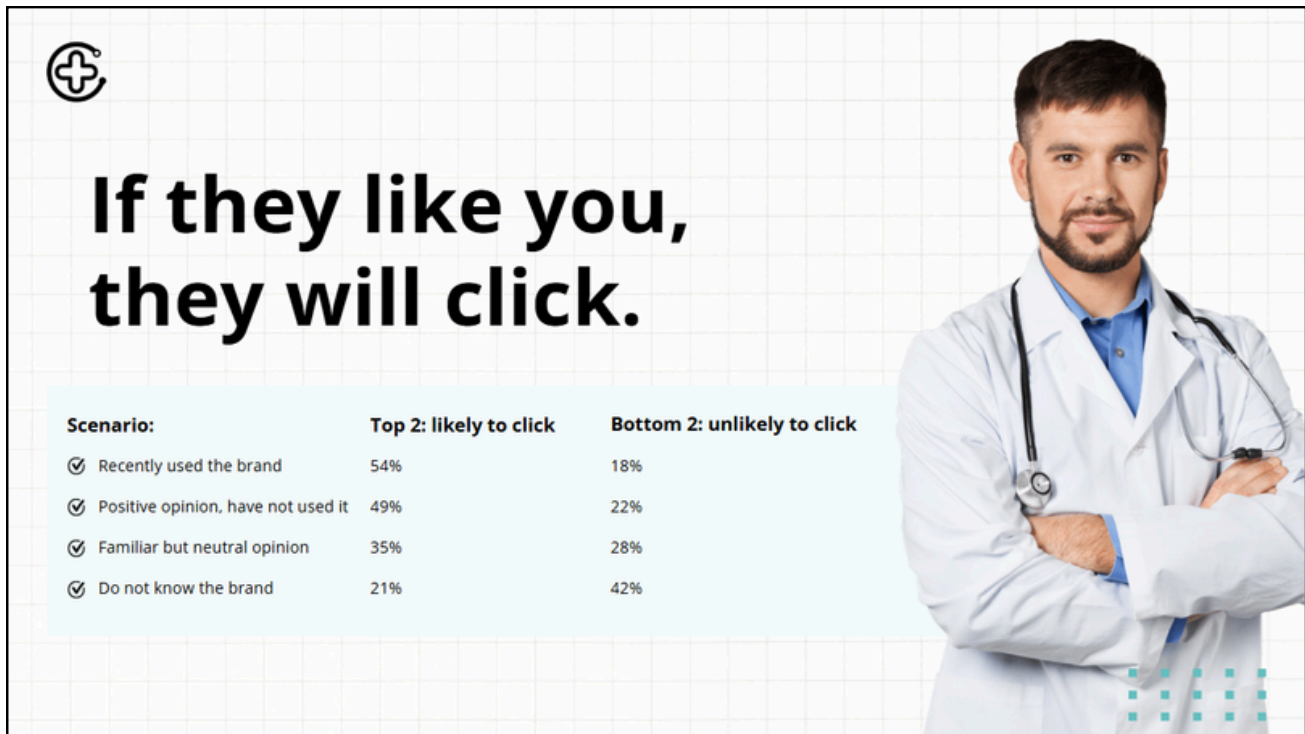
Think of it like planning a vacation — you're scanning reviews and wondering, "Were the beds actually comfortable?" while a travel agent zeros in on cancellation policies and star classifications. That same dynamic plays out when people compare hospitals online — peer reviews still lead, but AI gravitates toward third-party, authoritative proof (like U.S. News & World Report).

This is why you have to create human-centered content, highlight user-generated content, and build third-party proof and structured content for AI bots.

Digital ads: Familiarity still drives clicks, but even loyal brands face resistance

We tested click-likelihood for a health-related digital ad across 4 brand-familiarity conditions. The gradient is consistent: the more familiar the brand, the more likely the click.

But the biggest jump is not familiarity, it's sentiment. If they like you, they will click.



The gradient is nearly identical to 2025 — but there is a shift in the bottom 2:

- Among those who recently used the brand — the warmest possible audience — “definitely not” click rose 5 points (6% → 11%) ⚠
- “Might or might not” also rose 5 points (23% → 28%) among the same group. ⚠
- For unknown brands: 42% would definitely or probably not click.

Who people trust: Physicians lead, tech companies slide

We asked consumers to rate 14 healthcare entities on a scale of 0 to 10. Then we ranked them to see which made the top 3. Trust declined for most entities in 2026. Physicians are the exception.

| 14 Healthcare entities | 2025 top 3 choice | 2026 top 3 choice | Change | 2026 mean |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------|-----------|
| Physicians | 59% | 62% | +3 | 7.68 |
| Children’s hospitals | 59% | 55% | -4 | 7.51 |
| University hospitals | 59% | 49% | -1 | 7.18 |
| WebMD | 45% | 43% | -2 | 6.76 |
| Nonprofit hospitals | 48% | 42% | -6 ⚠ | 6.9 |
| Google | 46% | 38% | -8 ⚠ | 6.54 |
| Health insurance companies | 36% | 37% | +1 | 6.12 |
| CVS | 40% | 35% | -5 ⚠ | 6.43 |
| For-profit hospitals | 39% | 34% | -5 ⚠ | 6.41 |
| Amazon | 40% | 34% | -6 ⚠ | 6.04 |
| U.S. News Hospital rankings | 38% | 33% | -5 ⚠ | 6.32 |
| Apple | 38% | 32% | -6 ⚠ | 5.73 |
| Walmart | 35% | 32% | -3 | 5.86 |
| Pharmaceutical companies | 33% | 31% | -2 | 5.84 |

- Physicians stand alone: 62% of people put doctors as one of their top 3 choices — a mean of 7.68.
- Google had the steepest fall: down 8 points (46% → 38% top 3 box).
- Amazon, Apple, and nonprofit hospitals each fell 6 points.
- For-profit hospitals, CVS, and U.S. News all dropped 5 points.

Summary

What does all this mean for hospital marketers?

Every finding in this report points to a consumer who is searching less and asking more questions. Search is now a conversation, and trust is your most important asset.

Your hospital website still matters. A lot.

Despite all the AI noise, the hospital or health system website remains the most trusted destination for scheduling (41%), hospital services (41%), and finding a doctor (33%). It holds up while health plan confidence declines, and AI trust softens. Additionally, it's the content fuel for the AI engine. Keep investing in your site.

Show up in AI search, but don't count on it for brand awareness.

89% of people cannot recall any brand name they saw in the AI Overview. Appearing there has value for information reach, but it doesn't build brand memory. Pair AI search presence with channels that build recall — TV, direct mail, email, owned channels, and physician-led content. And know that while patients may not remember your name from the AI Overview, a third of them will trust you more for appearing there.

Explain how you use AI. Clearly.

Hospital AI authenticity perception fell 10 points. The sharpest shift was not more skepticism — it was more confusion. 22% of people now say they do not know enough to have feelings about it. If you use AI to write content, personalize communications, or power your chatbot, say so. Transparency is not a liability here. Silence is.

Lead with the human. Always.

The “fully AI is acceptable” answer dropped for almost every use case. The “AI provides input to a human decision” answer grew. Consumers want AI to assist, not replace. Highlighting the human role is increasingly important.

Physician trust is your most durable asset.

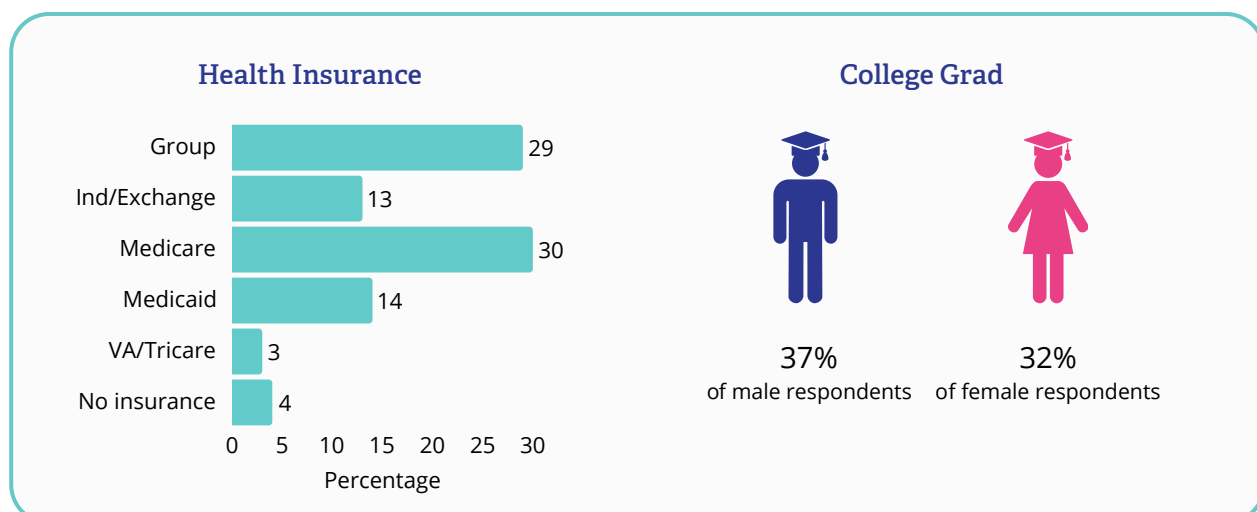
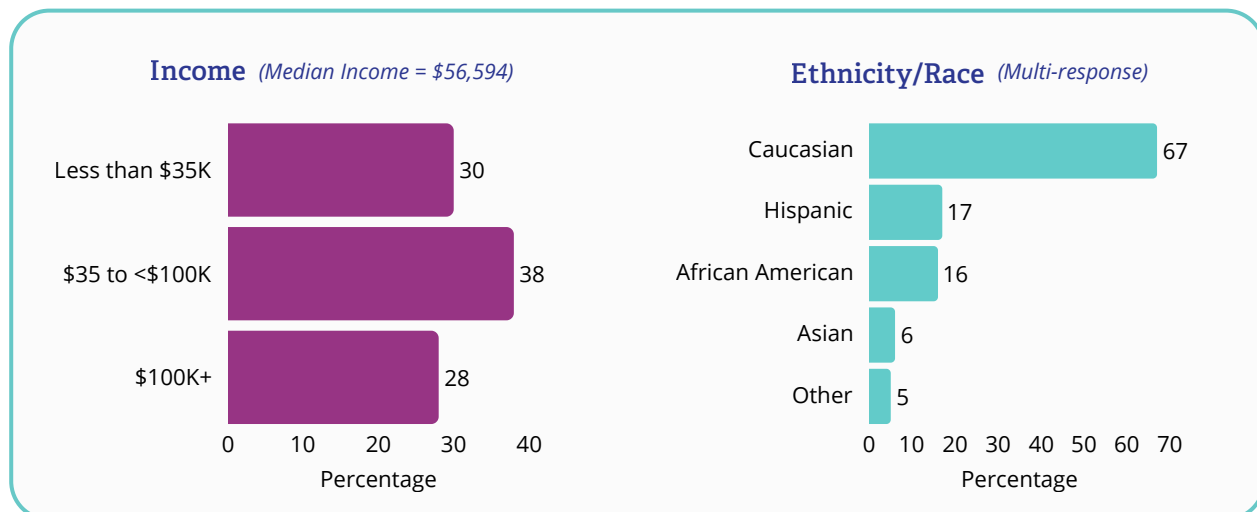
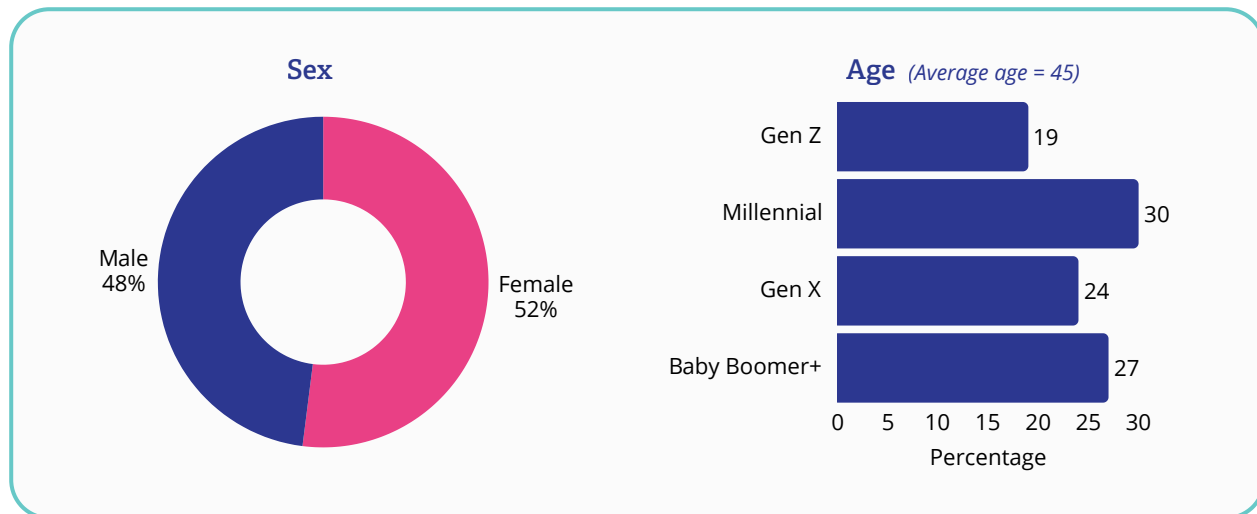
In a dataset where trust declined for most entities, physicians maintained a 62% high-trust rate and a mean score of 7.68. Physician-forward marketing, physician-authored content, and physician credibility cues are more valuable now than they were a year ago.

Expect more uncertainty from your audience, not less.

Across the board — from AI Overview source selection to hospital AI authenticity to reactions when seeing a familiar hospital in search — the “not sure” responses grew. Your patients are not forming firm negative opinions, but they are confused. Content that helps them understand what to expect, how things work, and what your role is will reduce that confusion and build the relationship.

Demographic profile

2026 sample composition:



Methodology

- Survey conducted by Aha Media Group and Klein & Partners, February 18-25, 2026.
- 500 U.S. adult healthcare decision-makers surveyed online. Margin of error: $\pm 3.7\%$ at the 90% confidence level.
- Weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population on key demographic variables.
- Year-over-year comparisons made to the September 2025 wave (n = 1,000). Shifts of 5 or more percentage points are noted as significant.
- Not all questions were asked in both years; questions unique to 2026 are noted as such.

About Aha Media Group

Aha Media Group is a healthcare content consultancy specializing in strategy, execution, and content operations. For 20+ years, we've partnered with 200+ healthcare organizations to create content that connects patients to the information and care they need.

The industry is evolving quickly. We track what's changing and share those insights with our clients and the broader healthcare marketing community.



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