Access to and use of digital health services – how to ensure they support health equity

Digital health services are any health services or health information that is provided online, through a mobile phone app or otherwise requires digital technology to access. Examples include telehealth, health information websites like HealthDirect Australia, and mobile phone apps aiming to improve users' health.

Australian and other governments have been shifting access to many public services onto digital platforms. This includes health information and services. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this

x   more likely to be tertiary educated,

x   more likely to live in an advantaged area of Australia, and

x   more likely to speak English at home.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are underrepresented among users of digital health services. People from regional and remote Australia are more likely to use digital health services than those in major cities.

Technical or financial barriers to using digital health services can affect access. Not everyone had a viable internet connection, the right technology or equipment (such as smartphones or laptops), or felt confident that they could find trustworthy services or information online. Physical disabilities such as arthritis, or English language literacy made digital access more difficult.

It is clear that some groups under-utilise digital health services, which may reflect barriers omic

great value for health service users in health professionals feeling able to recommend trustworthy sites.

Recommendation 3: Digital health services should use search engine optimisation to ensure information appears on the first page of search results as many participants reported only clicking on links on the first page of search results in a google search.

Recommendation 4: Government -supported digital health services should promote 'high trust' features to extend awareness, appeal or trustworthiness of their services.

One of the key issues for users to feel confident in using online health information was their self-assessed ability to distinguish between reliable and unreliable information. Key factors used to identify trustworthy sites included if they were Australian sites or '.gov.au' sites, and if they had clean, uncluttered page design, and included links to detailed information sources on particular conditions or issues. Trust was a key predictor of the extent to which participants use digital health services.

Recommendation 5: Consider strategies to develop and promote forum formats for