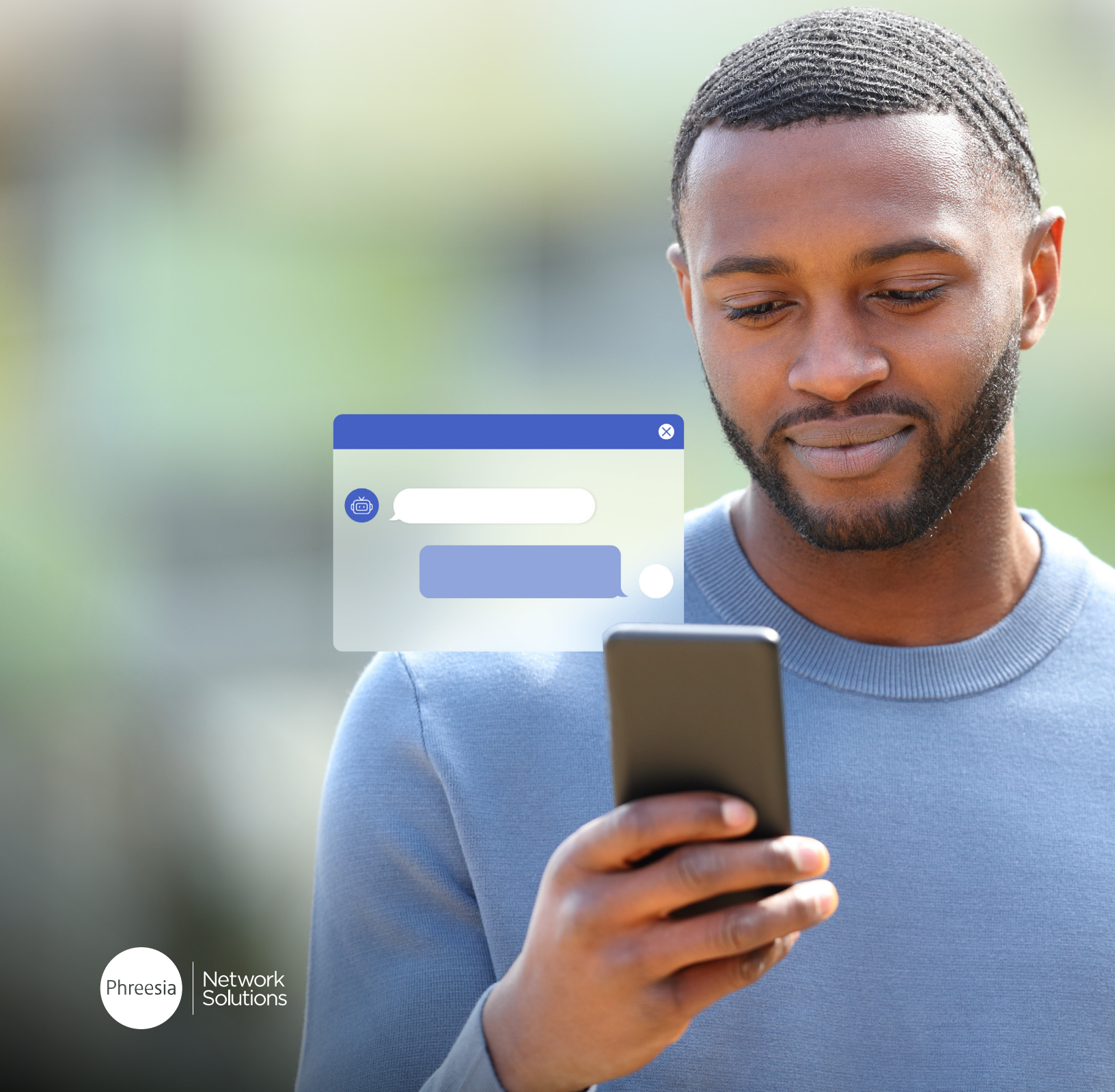
How AI chatbots are rapidly reshaping patients' health behaviors



Phreesia | Network Solutions

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Phreesia Network Solutions' survey finds that many patients use AI to manage their health, trust AI's health recommendations and don't discuss AI health recommendations with their providers, as well as that AI is changing health behaviors very rapidly

Introduction

When a person notices something unfamiliar related to their health—a new symptom, an out-of-range number on a lab result—their first instinct is to try and understand what it means. In the past, this often meant typing their concern into web search to ask Dr. Google (a behavior that elicited mixed feelings from HCPs). But as more people rely on generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) chatbots to answer a wide range of questions, these tools are becoming more ubiquitous when it comes to health management.

Chatbots (like ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini and Copilot) have rapidly become tools patients use to understand symptoms, seek emotional support, clarify medical advice and explore treatment options. Recent changes surrounding what counts as regulated health and wellness technology have further paved the way for these uses. While a large volume of anecdotal evidence and news media focuses on how patients use these chatbots for healthcare, fewer large-scale independent studies quantitatively assess patient behavior around the use of chatbots for healthcare.

To develop a clearer picture of how people use chatbots to manage their health and how quickly these behaviors are changing, Phreesia Network Solutions fielded a two-wave survey completed by over 5,174 patients. We found that chatbots are changing the ways in which people access and interpret information about their health and are likely to reshape patient–provider interactions in fundamental ways going forward. While policy regulation and recommendations from leading healthcare organizations to promote safer use of AI for healthcare is vital, there is also an opportunity for brands and healthcare communicators to use AI tools as educational assistants rather than substitutes for patient–provider interactions.

Methodology: About this research

Phreesia (a healthcare technology company that enabled more than 180 million patient visits in 2025—1 in 6 visits across the U.S.) digitally administered a voluntary, cross-sectional survey to a nationally representative study population (see Appendix 1 for Patient Sample Characteristics). The survey was first run between December 22, 2025 and January 4, 2026 and was completed by 1,852 individuals aged 18 years and older. Phreesia ran the survey a second time between April 14 and 20, 2026, when it was completed by 3,322 individuals aged 18 years and older. Surveys were administered after their check-in process for a medical appointment using the Phreesia platform. Individuals were presented with a Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act authorization, and signing an additional consent form thereafter constituted full consent. All results are reported with 95% confidence intervals.

Results[1]

General use of chatbots for health management

In the most recent wave, more than one in five patients (21%) say they turn to AI chatbots for health information, a statistically significant increase from the first wave of the survey, when only 18% of patients had ever used a chatbot for health information. Among patients under 45, adoption is meaningfully higher. This implies that usage is likely to rise rapidly as familiarity with and use of chatbots becomes more prevalent. needs, financial concerns, social determinants of health, sexual orientation, gender identity and religion.

21% of patients now use AI chatbots for health information

While ChatGPT is the dominant platform, the share of respondents using it fell from 80% to 75% in four months. In the same period, patients using other platforms went up: from 4% to 12% for Claude, and from 39% to 44% for Google Gemini, indicating that as different platforms improve, more patients are becoming aware of chatbots as a tool for health *and* that they have options.

[1]All results for the second wave of the survey, unless otherwise specified.

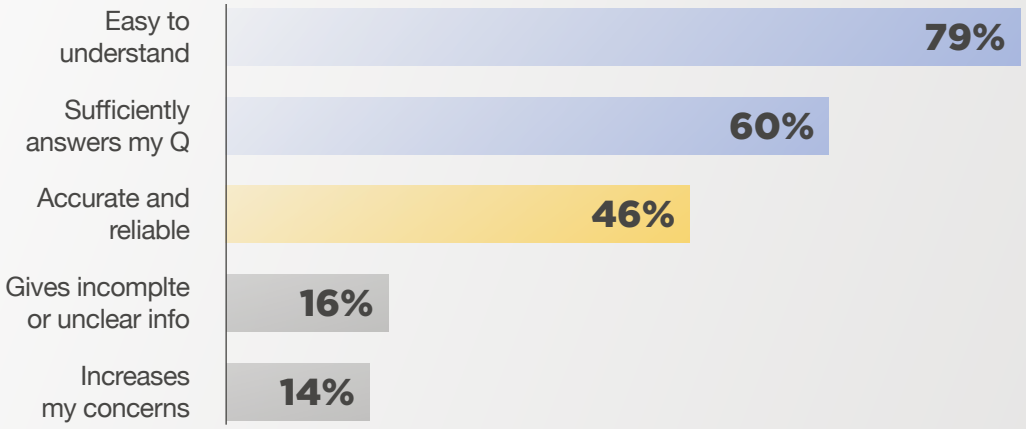
The number of patients using AI chatbots for health questions every week or more often rose from 39% to 42% in just four months—a statistically significant shift driven by existing users increasing frequency, not just new users entering the space.

Five percent of patients cited AI as their *primary* source of health information ahead of friends and family and health apps, closing in on WebMD. Across all information sources—HCPs, search engines, AI—8 in 10 patients seek information when new symptoms appear.

Perceived accuracy and trust in chatbots

While 79% of patients say the health information they receive from AI chatbots is easy to understand, and 61% say the chatbot answers their question sufficiently, less than half (46%) find the chatbot responses accurate or reliable. This mirrors patterns from past Phreesia research on how patients use social media for health information—specifically, that AI information on health is accessible but not deeply trusted, even by those who use it.

Patients find AI clear. They are less convinced it is accurate.



New research finds that almost 2 in 3 people polled (64%) think AI can perform at least one core health task as well as or better than a doctor. The Phreesia survey mirrors this: 1 in 2 patients say they do not discuss the information they receive from a chatbot with their provider. This finding is concerning because although patients say they know the chatbot information is not always accurate or reliable, they still find themselves relying on it. Without consultation with a provider, some patients may be acting upon false health information and putting themselves at risk.

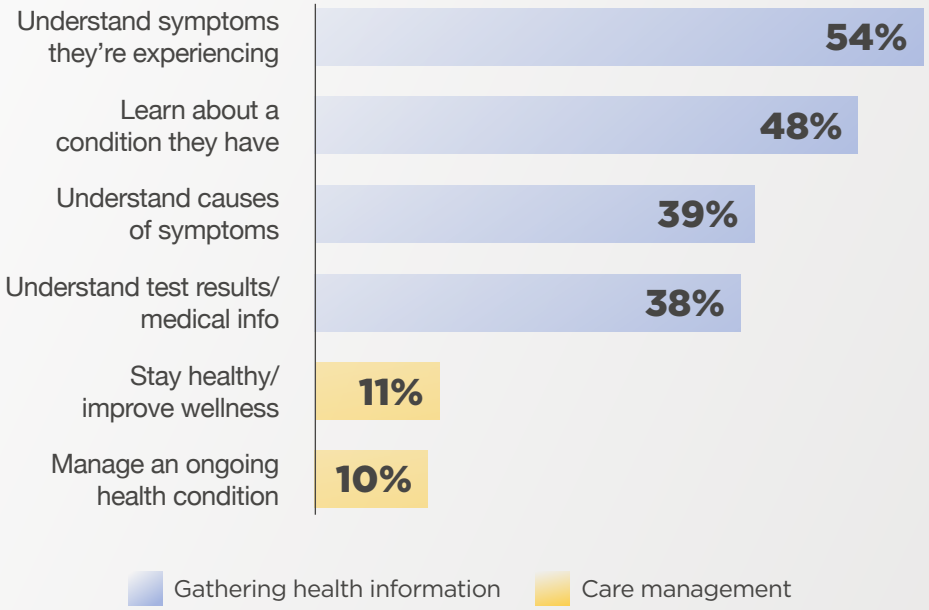
48% of AI users do not discuss what AI tells them with their doctor

Concerning the types of health issues for which patients are most comfortable turning to AI, trust is higher when it comes to gathering health-related information: 54% of patients say they trust chatbots to understand symptoms they're experiencing, and 48% say they trust it to learn about a condition they have.

Trust drops sharply for anything involving active care management, such as treatment options, managing ongoing conditions and next steps after a visit. Eleven percent of patients trust chatbots when it comes to learning how to stay healthy or improve overall wellness, and 10% trust it to help manage an ongoing health condition.

While about half (54%) of surveyed patients say they trust AI chatbots and online search engines (like Google) equally, 28% say they trust chatbots more, while only 19% say they trust search engines more. Trust is lowest for social media. In a separate survey, we found that only 10% of patients who have seen pharma ads on social media said they trust the information. This is noteworthy because in the short amount of time people have been using chatbots (compared with over two decades of using Google and seeing social media ads) chatbots have surpassed search engines as a trusted source of health information. This trust is likely to go up as AI models improve and chatbot use for healthcare becomes more widespread.

Trust holds for understanding. It collapses for active care management.



Among non-AI users, distrust increased. In the first wave of the survey, 33% of those who don't use AI for health questions cited distrust as the reason; this increased to 35% in 2026, a statistically significant increase suggesting that exposure to AI health content is crystallizing negative attitudes, not just indifference.

How people use chatbots to address mental health concerns

The ways in which people, particularly adolescents, use chatbots for mental health (as with other newer technologies) have been the subject of several high-profile news stories. Studies show that adolescents who spend more than three hours a day on social media face double the risk of mental health problems. While it took some time for social platforms to be closely examined in this way, GenAI companies are already facing challenges from chatbots' impact on youth mental health. In the most devastating instances, some deaths of teenagers by suicide have been linked back to conversations with ChatGPT, as in the death of 16-year-old Adam Raine or 14-year-old Sewell Garcia.

Chatbots are reshaping our mental, social and emotional worlds: the U.S. has long been facing a loneliness epidemic, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and many people are turning to chatbots for companionship or marriage counseling. But human–AI relationships could trigger a new wave of the mental health crisis. One study found that while AI therapy chatbots are positioned as one way to meet these growing mental health needs, these tools should not replace therapists. Another study found that users often anthropomorphize AI systems, forming parasocial attachments that can lead to emotional and social problems.

We included several questions in the survey to meaningfully understand and articulate the impact of GenAI tools on mental health, finding that 1 in 5 patients using AI chatbots for health ask about mental health and 16% ask about personal relationships.

Almost half of patients (48%) that use chatbots for mental health ask about their emotional wellbeing at least once a week, with younger patients engaging even more often. Nearly 3 in 5 patients (57%) say they use the chatbot to manage stress and anxiety.

When it comes to navigating personal relationships, around half of patients say they ask chatbots about identifying unhealthy patterns in relationships, and a similar amount ask about conflicts with a romantic partner or spouse.

More than 9 in 10 patients using chatbots for mental health or personal relationships say the responses are helpful. Notably, women are more likely than men to find chatbot information about mental health and personal relationships helpful.

62%

of women rate AI's responses on personal questions very or extremely helpful

Versus 50% of men

97% respondents said that AI chatbots' responses for mental or emotional health questions were at least somewhat helpful

This is alarming because new research published in Science finds that AI sycophancy is both prevalent and harmful: Across 11 AI models, AI affirmed users' actions 49% more often than humans on average, including in cases involving deception, illegality or other harms.

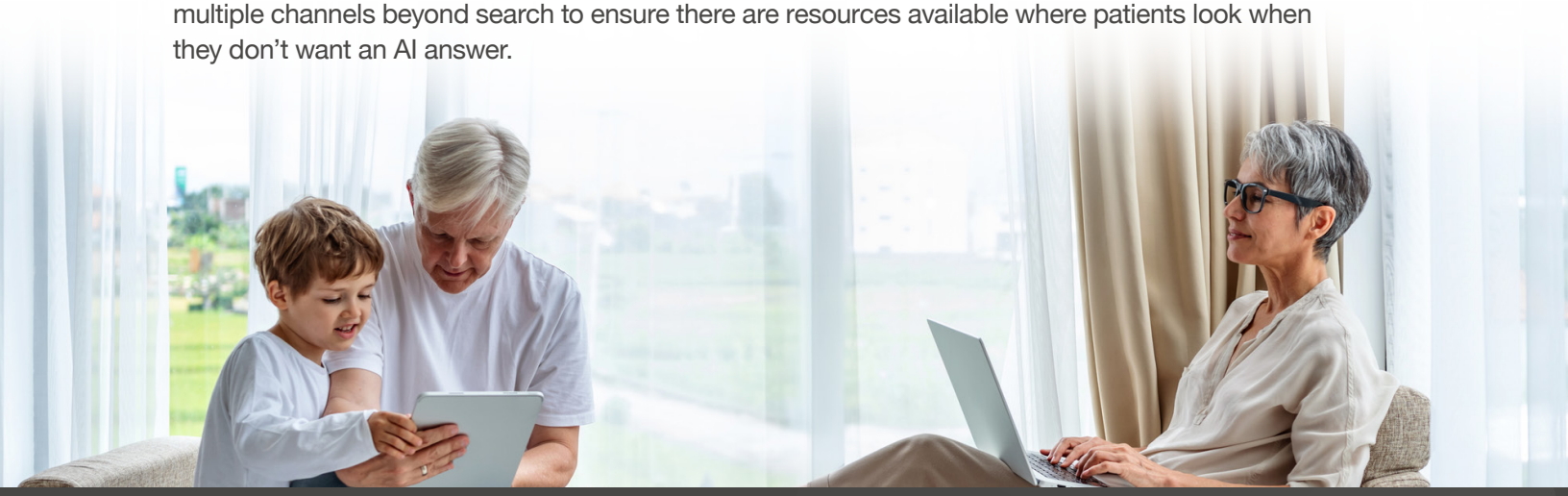
Among those who used AI chatbots for mental/emotional health topics, 9% said they found it less helpful than other tools in the first wave, a share that dropped to just 4% in the second wave. This is a statistically significant shift suggesting users are entrusting AI with mental and emotional issues at unprecedented rates.

For questions about mental health and personal relationships, sycophantic behavior is unhelpful at best and can be dangerous and life threatening. When people seek care for mental and behavioral health concerns from a trained professional, like a therapist, they may be in a state of emotional distress or at risk of self-harm. In such moments, sycophantic affirmation from an AI chatbot could cause further harm and threaten their long-term wellbeing.

Implications:

When we ran the second wave of the Phreesia survey, just four months after the initial one, the changes we noted indicate that use of GenAI for healthcare is increasing at an unprecedented rate. This trend is likely to continue, and mainstream chatbots will likely keep leaning into that demand, regardless of how and when regulators decide to get in the picture. Between the two waves of this study alone, leading AI platforms like ChatGPT announced a new health-specific resource, and tech giants Amazon and Microsoft launched patient-facing AI tools. Chatbots are already altering the dynamic between patients and providers in ways that can be risky to patients' health outcomes and unpredictable—sometimes largely invisible—to healthcare communicators. For those trying to reach patients with information about health, four implications follow:

- **Make disease and symptom content available and optimized:** Symptom-stage content is prominent in AI searches, so offering agentic search-optimized information helps get through to patients earlier. The next stage—when the patient digs deeper into condition explanations, treatment options, what to discuss at the visit—is where to focus materials on activation. Teams should focus on both stages, helping patients build on their initial AI search.
- **Be present where trust collapses:** AI is not trusted to explain treatments, ongoing management, side effects and other related topics. Make sure to share information about these topics through multiple channels beyond search to ensure there are resources available where patients look when they don't want an AI answer.



- **Build for the conversion moment:** Two in three patients who bring AI information to their doctor do so to verify what the chatbot said. Digital activations that appear shortly before HCP visits are a structural opportunity to intervene, when patients are receptive. Help reconcile what AI got right, fill in what it missed and explain what to do next when a trusted expert can reinforce and help patients take action.
- **De-risk AI use by paying attention to regulatory movement:** Use of chatbots for mental health and relational support is already more scrutinized than AI for any other category. That means adoption of AI tactics for patients in those categories carries the most regulatory uncertainty and reputational risk. Pay close attention to statements on AI from federal and state policy makers, novel lawsuits involving AI and health, and how others in your category are approaching AI initiatives. Within mental health specifically, waiting and watching may be the best position for now.

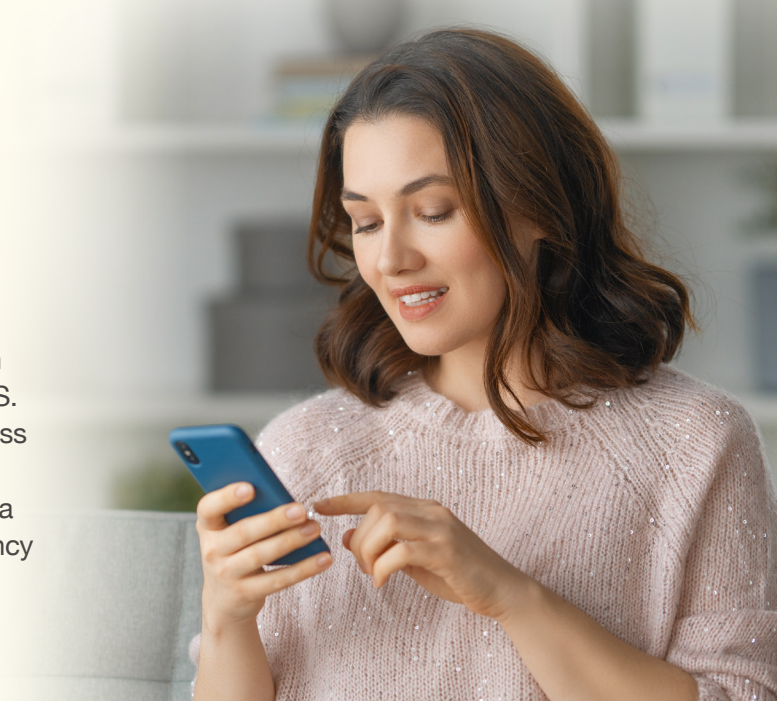
This survey demonstrated that AI chatbots are poised to rapidly become more ubiquitous in healthcare. Patients are arriving at their doctor's visits with a chatbot's read on their symptoms, but they likely still have questions. For brands, the question then becomes how to deepen patient understanding of a condition or treatment and still encourage them to continue to verify this information with providers. Brands have an opportunity to support patients as they verify what they have learned from chatbots through meaningful provider–patient interactions.

Key takeaways

- **AI chatbot use for health information is growing at an unprecedented rate**
  In just four months, the share of patients using a chatbot for health information rose from 18% to 21% – a statistically significant shift.
- **The platform landscape is diversifying**
  ChatGPT's share of health-info users fell from 80% to 75% in four months, while Claude jumped from 4% to 12%. As different platforms improve, patients are becoming aware that they have options.
- **AI health information is not deeply trusted, but patients use it anyway**
  Seventy-nine percent of patients say AI health information is easy to understand, yet only 46% find chatbot responses accurate or reliable.
- **AI health information is changing patient–provider interactions**
  One in 2 patients do not bring chatbot information up with their HCP. Because patients continue to rely on chatbot answers despite knowing they may not be accurate, some may act on false health information without ever consulting a provider.
- **Use of chatbots for mental health carries unique risks**
  One in 5 patients who use chatbots for health management ask about mental health, and more than 9 in 10 say the responses are helpful. But AI sycophancy can be harmful, making this the category with the highest regulatory uncertainty and reputational risk.

About Phreesia

Phreesia is the trusted leader in patient activation, giving healthcare providers, life sciences companies and other organizations tools to help patients take a more active role in their care. Founded in 2005, Phreesia enabled more than 180 million patient visits in 2025—1 in 6 visits across the U.S. This scale allows Phreesia to make meaningful impact across the healthcare ecosystem. Offering patient-driven digital solutions for intake, outreach, education and more, Phreesia enhances the patient experience, drives operational efficiency and improves healthcare outcomes. To learn more, visit networksolutions.phreesia.com.



Appendix: Demographic characteristics of patients

Wave 2 (April 2026): 3,322 completed surveys. Wave 1 (Dec 2025): 1,852 completed surveys. Composition reflects all completers in each wave.

AGE

CATEGORY	WAVE 1 (2025)	WAVE 2 (APR 2026)
18–44	34%	30%
45–64	31%	32%
65+	35%	38%

GENDER

CATEGORY	WAVE 1 (2025)	WAVE 2 (APR 2026)
Female	52%	56%
Male	48%	44%

RACE

CATEGORY	WAVE 1 (2025)	WAVE 2 (APR 2026)
White	71%	69%
Black	8%	8%
Other	21%	23%

URBANICITY

CATEGORY	WAVE 1 (2025)	WAVE 2 (APR 2026)
Rural	17%	17%
Suburban	58%	58%
Urban	26%	24%

HEALTH STATUS

CATEGORY	WAVE 1 (2025)	WAVE 2 (APR 2026)
Acute	22%	19%
Chronic	41%	45%
Healthy	37%	36%

ACTIVATION

CATEGORY	WAVE 1 (2025)	WAVE 2 (APR 2026)
High activation	73%	74%
Low activation	27%	26%