

A woman with long dark hair in a ponytail, wearing a red and white checkered shirt, is shown in profile looking down at a smartphone. She is standing in a field of tall yellow grass under a warm, golden sunset sky. The image features several decorative elements: a light green circle in the top left, a large teal circle on the right containing text, a dotted green line with an arrow pointing to the teal circle, and a semi-transparent orange circle behind the woman's hand.

INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVES:

Bridging the rural digital-health divide

Phreesia

Life
Sciences

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Executive summary

Are rural Americans living in the “digital dark?” It’s a notion that has prevailed over the years, with experts pointing to poor broadband access as a significant contributor to the deepening digital divide¹ in the U.S.

But while rural patients have less reliable wireless and internet coverage than their urban counterparts, it’s not stopping them from accessing the web. Similar percentages of rural and nonrural patients have smartphones and data plans, new survey data shows, and all patients tend to use the internet for similar activities, regardless of their proximity to urban centers.

Yet it’s clear that despite their internet use, rural patients are less likely to go online for healthcare information, and they tend to use fewer digital tools in general to manage their health. While marketers can and should connect with rural patients on the web, they need to make sure they’re reaching these patients in the right ways.

Based on survey responses gathered in December 2021 and January 2022 from more than 4,700 patients—including more than 1,800 rural residents—this report will examine what’s really behind the rural digital-health gap and what pharma marketers can do to help bridge it.

Introduction

Rural patients face obvious challenges in accessing care. For starters, 39% percent of rural patients travel an average of more than 20 miles for healthcare, compared with just 9% of urban patients, Phreesia data shows.

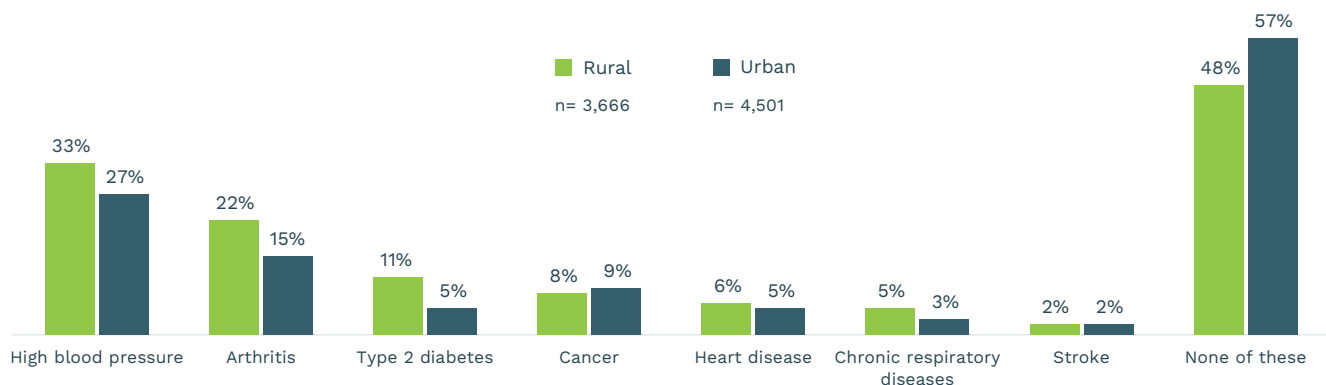
As a result, 14% of rural patients have skipped a doctor's visit in the past 12 months, versus just 9% of urban patients. And the problem is even worse among rural patients on Medicaid—28% of this population canceled a doctor's appointment in the past year because of traveling distance.

Percent of patients by insurance type who have skipped a doctor's appointment because of how far away it is



Those missed appointments are cause for concern, especially considering that rural patients suffer from higher rates of chronic conditions than those living in urban and suburban areas. As examples: 33% of rural patients have been diagnosed with high blood pressure, compared with 27% of urban patients; arthritis affects 22% of rural patients versus 15% of urban patients; and 11% of rural patients have Type 2 diabetes, well above the 5% of urban patients who deal with the disease. Rural residents also are more likely than urban residents to die prematurely from the five leading causes of death, including heart disease, cancer and stroke².

Which of the following conditions have you been diagnosed with, if any? Please select all that apply.



And while public health experts have heralded telehealth as a viable alternative for serving patients who live far from healthcare centers, they also have cited poor broadband as a limitation to telehealth's potential.

But internet access doesn't seem to be the whole problem. While there's no denying that patients in urban areas have better wireless and internet service—rural patients are about twice as likely to lack reliable coverage or fast home internet speeds compared with urban patients—there's another, potentially bigger factor in play among rural patients: poor health literacy.

Patients in rural communities generally find it more difficult to determine whether the information they find online is reliable, and they are more likely to be uncertain about how to apply it to their daily lives and how to use it to make health decisions according to survey data. At the same time, they reported having a tougher time asking clear questions about their health, expressing their feelings and communicating their health concerns in writing.

Of course, not all rural patients struggle with health literacy, and those who do are not alone, as the problem also affects those in urban areas. But pharma marketers face additional challenges in tackling these issues among rural patients and should take a mindful approach to reaching this group digitally.

So, then, what can pharma marketers do to help improve health literacy and equip rural patients with the information they need? Phreesia Life Sciences set out to answer that question in December 2021 and January 2022 with a nationwide survey of 4,751 adult patients checking in for their doctors' appointments.

The survey captured responses from 2,902 urban and suburban patients and 1,849 rural patients of varying ages and races and spanned both the commercially insured and Medicaid recipients.



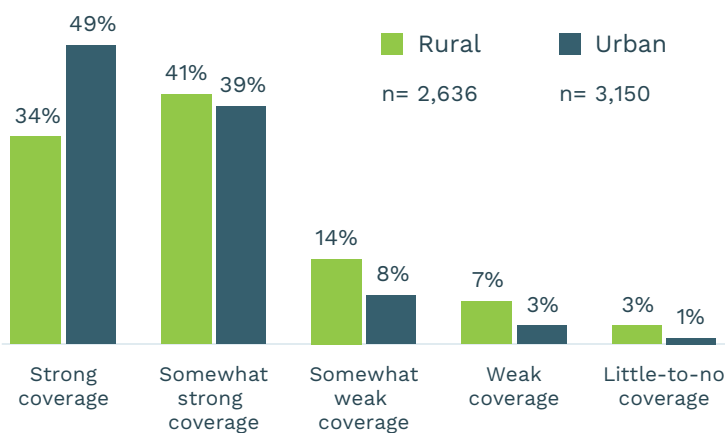
Meet patients where they are

Internet coverage and speed are certainly a problem outside of urban areas, where surveyed rural residents were found to be twice as likely to have “somewhat weak” to “no wireless coverage” (24%) as urban residents (12%), and “somewhat slow” to “no internet at home” (31%) compared to those living in cities (16%). There’s no question that network improvements would make digital-health tools more accessible to rural patients.

But despite these infrastructure hurdles, most surveyed patients reported having access to a smartphone and a data plan, regardless of their geographic location. Only 7% of rural patients said they didn’t have access to smartphones and data plans—only a percentage more than the 6% of urban patients who said they lacked such access. And 52% of rural patients said they have unlimited data plans—once again, only slightly less than the percentage of smartphone-toting urban patients who reported having unlimited plans (55%).

How is the internet coverage of your wireless service provider where you live, on average?

Among patients who have data plans for their smartphones

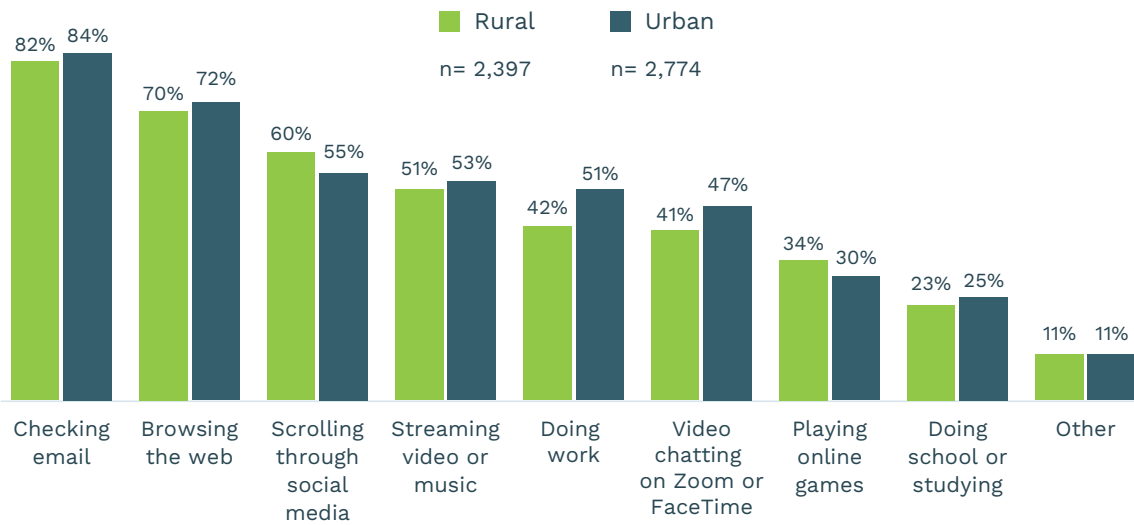


What’s more, patients in large and small communities alike use their smartphones for the same tasks. Some 82% of rural patients and 84% of urban patients use their phones to check their email, making it the top activity for smartphone users across geographies. Web browsing is the second-most popular activity, with 70% of rural patients and 72% of urban patients reporting that they surf the internet. And nearly two-thirds (60%) of rural patients use their smartphones to scroll through social media, even more than the 55% of urban patients who use their phones for the same purpose.



Which of the following things do you use internet for? Please check all that apply.

Among patients who have data plans for their smartphones



Given the connectivity challenges in rural areas, marketers should strive to reach rural patients in the digital spaces they already frequent by engaging them on social media and using first-party data strategies to reach their email inboxes. Mobile tactics and smartphone-optimized content also are musts, considering the percentage of rural patients who use their phones to browse and scroll.

Help patients navigate the online world

However, simply embracing a mobile-friendly strategy won't be enough to successfully activate these patients, survey data shows. While rural and urban patients report similar digital-health literacy, both groups have more trouble navigating online spaces than patients in the suburbs do.

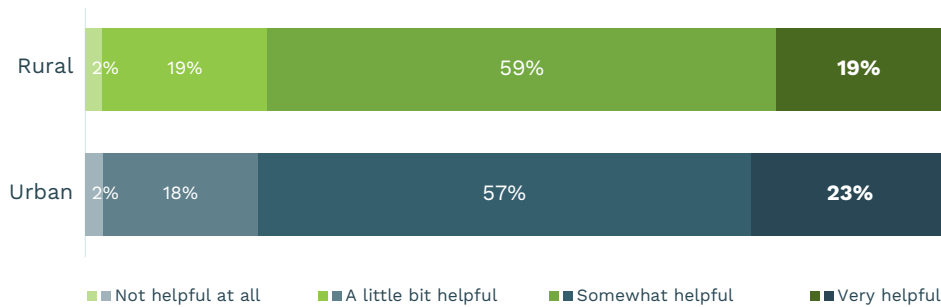
When searching the internet for health information, 40% of rural patients have trouble determining if the information they find is reliable, compared with 37% of urban patients and 32% of suburban patients; 26% are uncertain about how to use internet information to make health decisions, versus 23% of urban patients and 21% of suburban patients; and 25% struggle to find the appropriate words or search terms to locate the information they're seeking, compared with 22% of urban patients and 20% of suburban patients.

So it's no surprise that 28% of rural patients very rarely (less than once a year) go online for health information, and that 12% never use the internet for health information—a significantly higher number than the percentage of those in urban (9%) and suburban (8%) communities who never look for health information on the web.

And when rural patients do search online, they tend to find the health information they discover less helpful than urban patients do. Less than one-fifth (19%) of surveyed rural patients categorized the information they found online as “very helpful” versus 23% of urban patients.

How helpful is the information you find online?

Among patients who have data plans for their smartphones



They also are more likely to mistrust their internet search results: Only 14% of rural patients said they “very much” or “completely” trust the health information they find online, compared to 18% of urban patients.

These rural patients need help navigating online spaces. They need more education and technical support from the industry, along with tips to help them search more effectively online for the health information they seek.

Personalize content

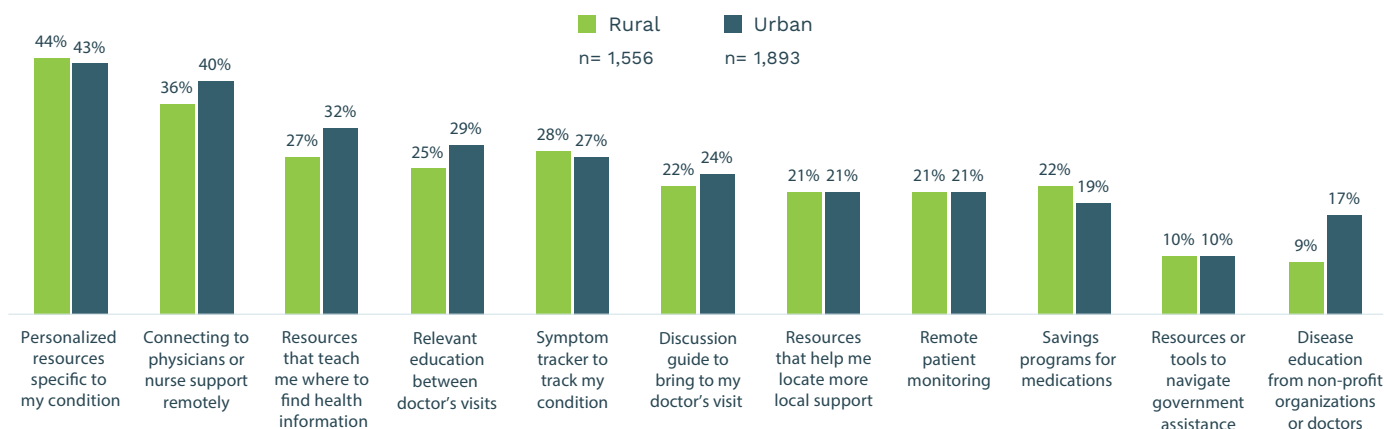
Perhaps related to their lower digital-health literacy, rural patients also feel slightly less confident overall in managing their health than urban patients do, though portions of both populations lack confidence in this area.

Just over two-thirds (69%) of surveyed rural patients said they felt “very” or “completely” confident managing their health, while 74% of urban patients said the same.

Pharma can help improve that confidence by providing the information that patients want and need. Across the board, surveyed patients’ top-requested tools to help manage their health were personalized resources specific to their condition, with 44% of rural patients and 43% of urban patients ranking such resources among the five they would find most helpful.



Which of the following would be most helpful to manage your health? Please select your top 5.



Regardless of where patients live, marketers should consider using channels that can target them based on their health conditions to deliver the disease-specific information they seek. Doing so may particularly help low-income rural patients since 53% of surveyed rural Medicaid recipients requested personalized health resources.

Remote physician and nurse support and relevant education between doctors' visits also ranked among patients' most-requested resources.

Support doctor-patient conversations with point-of-care outreach

Some rural patients also struggle to effectively communicate their health concerns. One-quarter (25%) of surveyed patients in this group reported having trouble verbally formulating questions and expressing their health-related worries, compared with 19% of urban patients. And virtually the same percentage find it difficult to articulate their questions, thoughts and feelings in writing: 26% of rural patients said they have a hard time composing messages that communicate exactly what they want to say to their doctor and others, compared with 19% of urban patients.

Rural patients also are comparatively less likely to share the information they find online with their doctors, with 36% reporting that they do so "all" or "almost all" of the time, versus 41% of urban patients.

For these reasons, marketers may want to consider educating patients at the point of care just before they go into the exam room so they can talk to their doctors about new information that's fresh in their mind. Particularly if the pre-appointment content they see is personalized and easy to understand, patients may feel more empowered to participate in shared decision-making with their healthcare providers.



Recommendations for pharma marketers:

- ✔ Consider strategies for reaching rural patients in the online spaces they already frequent, such as social media and email
- ✔ Use mobile-friendly tactics and optimize all content for mobile use
- ✔ Support policies that aim to improve broadband and health education in rural areas
- ✔ Connect rural patients to local healthcare providers and support resources
- ✔ Help rural patients navigate the internet with technical support and education that builds their digital-health literacy and boosts their confidence in managing their care
- ✔ Provide tips and tools for effective online searches to help rural patients find the information they're looking for from reliable sources
- ✔ Personalize content to match rural patients' health conditions, including relevant disease-awareness education
- ✔ Incorporate real patient stories to create more authentic content and build trust within sometimes-skeptical rural audiences
- ✔ Reach patients at the point of care to support their conversations with their doctor and to empower them to take an active role in decisions about their care

About Phreesia Life Sciences

Phreesia empowers life sciences companies to connect meaningfully with clinically relevant patients, delivering targeted health content in a one-to-one setting. Our PatientConnect offering identifies and motivates the right patients to initiate meaningful brand conversations, and our PatientInsights product enables our clients to better understand their target patient populations.

Phreesia meets patients where they are, both virtually and in-person, and reaches them at multiple touchpoints throughout their healthcare journey.

To learn more about Phreesia Life Sciences, visit lifesciences.phreesia.com

End notes

1. "[Is the Digital Divide the Newest Social Determinant of Health?](#)" Patient Engagement *HIT*, March 10, 2021.
2. "[Telehealth in Rural Communities](#)," National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion.

