

A multimethod study of NHS 111 online

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Plain language summary

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Plain language summary

NHS 111 services help people who need health advice or care by telephone (using the 111 number) and online (using the web on a smartphone or a computer). Demand for general practitioner and emergency care services keeps increasing, and there are concerns that sometimes people do not use the right services for the health problems that they have. NHS 111 can direct people to services and give advice that helps them carry out more self-care.

Previous research suggests that not everyone finds online services easy to use. There is a worry that NHS 111 services may increase work for other health services. Our research used interviews and surveys to find out about the NHS 111 online service.

We interviewed 80 people working in or with NHS services to find out about their experiences of NHS 111 online. There was low awareness of NHS 111 online, partly because there are so many other computer technologies and different services available. Interviewees often mixed-up NHS 111 online with the 111 telephone service. People are confused about where to get help. Interviewees also said that NHS 111 creates 'extra work', especially for emergency departments (accident and emergency). We interviewed 41 staff and stakeholders linked with a similar system used in Australia, called Healthdirect, and they had similar concerns.

Our survey found that people who had used NHS 111 online were younger and had higher levels of education. People who had used NHS 111 online also had higher eHealth literacy (they were more able to access and understand online health services); however, they were also sicker, reported having more long-term conditions and used more health services.

Our research suggests that we need to reduce confusion about what NHS 111 online does, get rid of unnecessary extra work and see whether or not it improves access to care for everyone.

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