

What Your Patients Searched for Most in 2016

Brenda Goodman | December 09, 2016



The Zika virus surprised everybody in 2016 and sent people searching for more information about its symptoms and how to prevent it. Surprising side effects of common medications and high drug prices also earned spots on the list of year's top searches. Prince's death from a fentanyl overdose caused a spike in searches for information related to opioid abuse, and Olympian Michael Phelps put cupping therapy on the map.

Here's a look at the top search trends on WebMD for 2016.

Zika

There have been lots of yardsticks used to show how a little-known virus named Zika rocketed around the globe this year. In 2016, WebMD searches for Zika-related terms increased by 433,558%.

There was a good reason for the spike in interest.

Zika caught the world's attention in dramatic fashion, as news photographers working in Brazil captured images of babies born with abnormally small heads—a condition called microcephaly.

"Never before in history has there been the situation where a bite from a mosquito could result in a devastating malformation," said CDC Director Tom Frieden at an April news briefing. Early in the year, Frieden also tweeted a picture of a few medical studies stacked in front of him on a table.

"Entire world literature on Zika," he wrote on February 12. "50 years of neglect."

As the year progressed, the news about Zika just got worse. Not only could it cause microcephaly; researchers also learned it could cause a range of harm to babies' hearing and vision and brain abnormalities, even in babies born with apparently normal head sizes. It can also harm adults. Zika infections have been linked to a handful of deaths in adults, and it's triggered cases of paralyzing Guillain-Barre syndrome and brain swelling.

We also learned mosquitoes weren't the only way to catch the virus.

As Zika spread to countries where the infection had never previously been seen, scientists learned that the infection could be sexually transmitted — in some cases, weeks after a man or woman had been infected. That led to sweeping new precautions against unprotected sex for pregnant women and their partners and travelers.

Zika also moved to the U.S. mainland, with new cases being passed from people to mosquitoes in Miami and possibly in South Texas. An area of Miami Beach, FL, still has active transmission, which means we may hear more about this fast-spreading virus in 2017.

Heartburn Drugs and the Brain

New studies out this year tied popular proton pump inhibitor (PPI) medications for acid reflux and heartburn to an increased risk for dementia in older adults. That triggered searches for more information about these widely used medications and their side effects. Searches for the terms PPI and dementia grew by nearly 57,000% this year. A study last year also linked the drugs to an increased risk for kidney failure.

The authors of the dementia study say that the drugs are also known to deplete vitamin B12, which is linked to mental function. They may also affect levels of amyloid and tau in the brain, proteins that have been associated with Alzheimer's disease. But they also cautioned that more studies are needed before a cause-and-effect relationship can be proven.

Drug Price Hikes

The soaring price of EpiPens — a lifesaving device for people with severe allergies — had consumers fuming, and searches for terms related to EpiPens and cost were up 1,677% on WebMD. After the controversy, drug maker Mylan took action to reduce costs for the drug dispenser, which is used to inject the hormone epinephrine.

Cupping

The round bruises on swimmer Michael Phelps at the Olympics sent searches for the term "cupping" up by 136% among consumers in 2016. The centuries-old traditional Chinese therapy is trendy among athletes wanting to improve flexibility and range of motion. Therapists who use it believe it improves blood flow to an area and speeds recovery.

Opioid Abuse

Searches for the terms opioid and opioid abuse jumped 228% this year for consumers. The searches increased after authorities announced that the singer and songwriter Prince had overdosed on the powerful drug fentanyl. The musician was found dead at his home in April.

Search interest also surged after the White House announced a package of new initiatives aimed at expanding treatment for substance abuse.

Food Recalls

Consumers tuned into news about tainted food this year, too. Searches for food recalls jumped 263% in 2016 compared to the year before. Popular foods recalled this year included Eggo waffles, Sabra hummus, Blue Bell ice cream, and Tyson chicken nuggets.

Kratom

Is Kratom a potentially helpful dietary supplement? Or a drug of abuse? That's the question being weighed by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) as it considers whether to ban it. The plant's bitter leaves are used to relieve pain and curb addiction, but have also been linked to at least 15 deaths in the last two years. The DEA was planning to make kratom a Schedule I drug, the same as marijuana and heroin, but postponed that decision. Scientists and consumers have asked the agency to give them a chance to study it.

News of the DEA's pending kratom ban more than doubled search interest; searches were up 119% from 2015 to 2016.

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