How Liver Transplant Patients Can Benefit From Social Media

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Social media support groups on sites like Facebook can be a helpful tool for increasing patient engagement and satisfaction when people are undergoing liver transplant surgery, according to a new digital pilot study published in the journal Surgery, MobiHealthNews reports.

For the study, researchers at the University of Cincinnati created a Facebook group for hundreds of liver transplant patients to use as a community forum during the surgery process. Family members, caregivers and health care providers were also given access to the digital support channel; all told, 350 active users shared their stories, insights and challenges over a nine-month study period. Fifty percent of users were liver transplant patients, 36 percent were caregivers and friends and 14 percent were health care providers.

Over the course of the study, users contributed 339 posts, 2,338 comments and over 6,000 reactions to the group. “Supportive or inspirational comment” was the most common type of post in the group, followed by informational posts about the liver transplant process.

A post-study survey found that 95 percent of respondents said the digital connection had an overall positive impact on their care. This included helping to reduce stress related to the physical and psychosocial symptoms of end-stage liver disease, dealing with the uncertainty of waiting for an available organ and adhering to strict medication regimens post-surgery.

Researchers concluded that these types of support groups are sustainable because during the study period, the number of new members in the forum increased by approximately 10 to 15 percent every month, and the number of posts remained stable. What’s more, group members commented or otherwise responded to 98 percent of the posts.

Because less than 20 percent of participants responded to the survey, however, study authors said further research is needed to evaluate the potentially positive impact of social media initiatives for transplant.

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