

Health anxiety in adolescents: the roles of online health information seeking and parental health anxiety

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Background

Due to **rapid changes related to puberty**, adolescents tend to be very **mindful of their body**.

This may contribute to **health anxiety**, i.e., misinterpreting bodily sensations as symptoms of disease or fear of contracting some illness.

Nonetheless, **health anxiety in adolescence** and its covariates **remain relatively understudied**.

Parental health anxiety is known to be related to health anxiety of adolescent (Wright et al., 2017).

Online health information seeking serves as another risk factor, but this **has never been tested for adolescents** (Baumgartner & Hartmann, 2011).

Objectives

- To explore the **effect of online health information seeking (OHIS) on health anxiety for adolescents** and to explore it separately for disease- and fitness-related seeking.
- To test whether **eHealth literacy** (ability to seek and evaluate health information online) **mitigates** this relationship.
- To study the effect of **OHIS and parent health anxiety** on adolescent health anxiety in a **single model**.

Methods

- Parent-child dyadic data, an online survey in **2020**
- Filled **separately by one parent and adolescent** from the same household
- Sample of 1,530 parent-child dyads, **representative** of Czech households with children
- Adolescents' age** - 13-18 years ($M = 15.4$, $SD = 1.7$, 50% girls)
- Parents' age** - 29-75 ($M = 45$, $SD = 6.4$, 68% women)

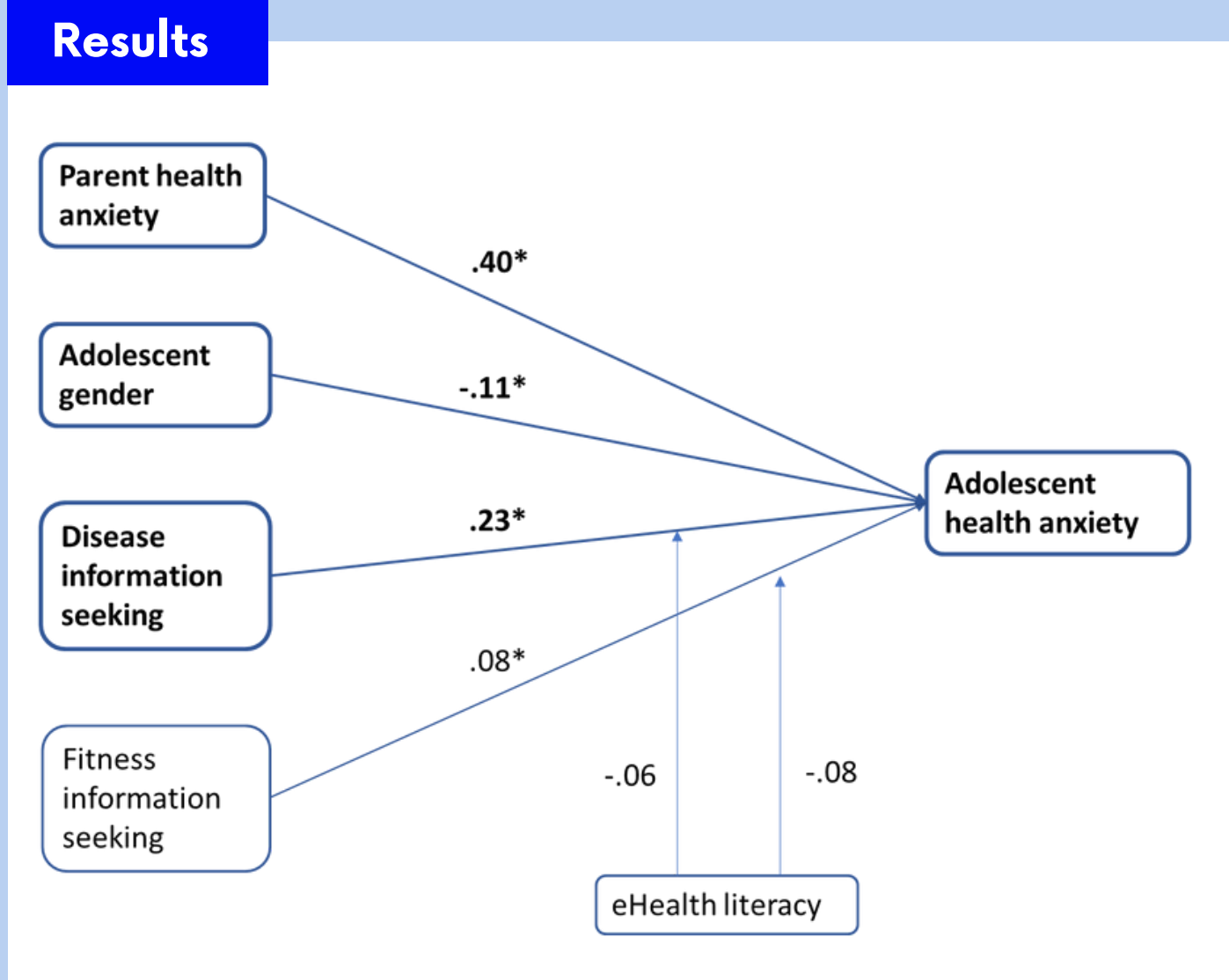
Measures

<p>Demographics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> parent's gender child's gender 	<p>Health anxiety</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> parent HA (5 items, $\omega = .83$) adolescent HA (5 items, $\omega = .83$)
<p>eHealth literacy (6 items, $\omega = .84$)</p>	
<p>Online health information seeking (adolescent)</p>	
<p>Disease-related seeking (3 items, $\omega = .80$)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> COVID-19 Other diseases, injuries, or their treatment Medicines or medicinal substances 	<p>Fitness-related seeking (3 items, $\omega = .82$)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Healthy eating and nutrition How to exercise or do sports Losing weight (e.g., diets, weight-loss tutorials)

6-point scale: (never-several times a day)
Timeframe: past few months

Results

- In line with our expectations, **parental and adolescent health anxiety were strongly related**.
- Disease-related seeking was also related** to adolescent health anxiety, which is also in line with expectations.
- On the other hand, **fitness-related seeking** was associated with health anxiety **only marginally**.
- Contrary to our expectations, the level of adolescents' **eHealth literacy did not affect the association** between either fitness- or disease-related seeking



Conclusions

Our results support the **strong relationship between health anxiety of parent and adolescent**. Therefore we recommend that their health anxiety is addressed **simultaneously**.

We newly show that seeking disease-related information online can contribute to adolescent health anxiety, like in adults.

On the other hand, fitness-related seeking did not have such effect, contrary to findings about adults. It is possible that **adolescents differ from adults in their motivations for seeking fitness-related information** and their search may lead to less distressful results.

The **effect of eHealth literacy** on the relationship between online health information seeking may be only **lacking due to the used measure** which seems to capture rather self-efficacy than actual literacy level.

Our findings contribute to understanding of factors related to adolescent health anxiety and underline the **significant position of parents**.