Digital health literacy in general populations – An international comparison

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Background:
Due to the digital transformation in late modern society, digital (or e-) health literacy (DHL) is becoming increasingly relevant for people to take health related decisions. Yet despite its importance for evidence-based policy, very few tools have been developed to measure DHL, and even fewer studies have measured DHL in general populations. The Action Network on Measuring Population and Organizational Health Literacy (M-POHL) is one of the first to include a measure of DHL and its relevant correlates in the Health Literacy Survey 2019 (HLS19).

Methods:
Based on an existing instrument (Van der Vaart & Drossaert, 2017), adapted to the format of the HLS-EU questionnaire for measuring comprehensive health literacy, 10 items with four Likert categories were developed to measure self-reported DHL, as well as 6 questions measuring the use of digital resources to obtain health related information and communicate with their health care system, as an optional package of the HLS19 study. Ten of the 15 countries participating in HLS19 included this optional package into their national survey. Data were collected from probability samples of at least 1.000 respondents per country, taken from the general population 18+ by personal interviews, telephone interviews or internet.

Results:
For comparisons between countries, distributions of the answers to single items as well as psychometric validation and descriptive data for an index of DHL will be presented. Associations of DHL with general comprehensive health literacy, with the use of digital resources, and with other selected correlates based on correlational and regression analysis will also be presented comparatively for countries.

Conclusions:
This study is the first to present standardized comparative data for the distributions of DHL and its correlates in the general population of WHO-Europe region Member States. The relevance of these results for national and European health policy will be discussed.

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