

The benefits of AI in health care outweigh potential hazards, many experts say

Warm-up question: When it comes to health decisions, how comfortable are you using technology or online tools for advice? What would make you trust, or distrust, AI in this area?

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AILSA CHANG, HOST: Every week, hundreds of millions of people turn to ChatGPT for questions about health. That's according to OpenAI. The company now has a platform specifically dedicated to helping people with their health needs. Patients and doctors say it's one example of the way AI is changing the practice of medicine. NPR's Katia Riddle reports from Portland, Oregon.

KATIA RIDDLE, BYLINE: It's been four years since Burt Rosen was diagnosed with cancer.

BURT ROSEN: I have two primary cancers. So I like to joke - I went to the cancer store on buy one, get one free day.

RIDDLE: Rosen is sitting in his office. He works in marketing for a local college. He's 60. He looks like any other working guy you might see downtown wearing the business casual uniform. It's not obvious he has cancer.

ROSEN: I have one that's fairly common, which is called renal clear cell carcinoma, or a kidney cancer, and the other one, which is much less common, is called a pancreatic neuroendocrine tumor.

RIDDLE: He's working closely with his doctors, but he says his secret weapon to managing treatment side effects and keeping as stable as possible, information and knowledge about his disease with an AI platform called My Doctor Friend. Recently, he's also been using the new OpenAI platform ChatGPT Health. Here's a recent example he brought to AI.

ROSEN: I said, every time I sleep, whether it's a nap or overnight, I wake up with a bad headache, almost **migraine** level, and a lot of **nausea**.

RIDDLE: In response, he says, AI asked him what position he slept in. It suggested that lying flat could allow pressure to build up in his head.

ROSEN: So it's not surprising you wake up with a headache, and then the nausea can actually be a symptom of a migraine headache.

RIDDLE: Try sleeping with two pillows, AI suggested. No more headaches. With people rapidly incorporating AI into their health care, there are many unanswered questions. How will patients protect their privacy? How can they avoid misinformation? Will there be a great divide between patients who are technically **savvy** and those who aren't?

ROBERT WACHTER: I actually think it's going to be a really good thing for health care.

RIDDLE: Dr. Robert Wachter is chair of the Department of Medicine at University of California San Francisco. He's just written a book called "A Giant Leap: How AI Is Transforming Healthcare And What That Means For Our Future." Wachter acknowledges all the questions around AI and medicine, but he says for many doctors, the changes have already been **profound**, like a tool that automatically transcribes conversations with patients.

WACHTER: Doctors now have access to what's called an AI scribe. So if you come in and see me in the office, I'm going to put a phone down on the desk and ask your permission, and we will have a conversation. I will be looking you in the eye. Two years ago, you know, I would have been sitting there **pecking away** on my computer.

RIDDLE: Another change - he says he and his colleagues have widely adopted a program called OpenEvidence, kind of a ChatGPT for doctors that has put invaluable medical information **at their fingertips**. Wachter stresses that AI cannot be trusted without human oversight. Recently, he saw AI suggest someone take ivermectin to treat testicular cancer.

WACHTER: It probably wouldn't hurt you, but what would hurt you is you're not getting appropriate treatment for your cancer that's totally treatable. So, you know, the capacity for badness here is pretty high.

RIDDLE: Still, Wachter says the benefits outweigh these kinds of hazards. That's in part because he says there is so much room for improvement in medicine and health care.

WACHTER: Like, if you asked me, what do you think about AI in general? I'm worried about what it does to our politics. I'm, you know, worried about deep fakes. I'm worried about jobs, and all those things are very real. It's just - in the corner of the world that I work in, I just see a system that is falling apart.

RIDDLE: A system, he says, that desperately needs help from new technology. Even still, says Wachter, there's two things in American health care that AI cannot solve. That's how to insure people and how to pay for their care. Only humans can fix those problems.

Katia Riddle, NPR News, Portland, Oregon.

Vocabulary and Phrases:

1. **Elder statesman:** An experienced and respected leader who offers guidance and wisdom rather than direct control.
2. **Migraine:** A severe headache often accompanied by sensitivity to light, sound, or movement.
3. **Nausea:** A feeling of sickness in the stomach that makes someone feel like they might vomit.
4. **Savvy:** Having practical knowledge and the ability to use tools or technology effectively.
5. **Profound:** Very great or intense; having a deep impact or importance.
6. **Pecking away:** Typing continuously, often for a long time, usually on a computer keyboard.
7. **At (one's) fingertips:** Easily and quickly available when needed.

Fill in the Blank

Use the correct word or phrase from the vocabulary list.

1. AI tools have had a _____ effect on how doctors document patient visits.
2. Burt Rosen described waking up with a headache that felt close to a _____.
3. There is concern that less technically _____ patients may be left behind.
4. Along with the headache, he also experienced severe _____.
5. Medical knowledge is now available to doctors almost instantly, right _____.
6. Doctors used to spend much of their time _____ on computers during appointments.

Comprehension Questions:

1. Why does Burt Rosen use AI tools alongside his doctors?
2. What advice did the AI give Rosen to reduce his headaches and nausea?
3. What concerns exist about patients using AI for health information?
4. How are AI tools changing the way doctors interact with patients during visits?
5. Why does Dr. Wachter believe AI must always be supervised by humans?
6. What problems in American health care does Wachter say AI cannot solve?

Discussion Questions:

1. Would you feel comfortable using AI to help manage health symptoms? Why or why not?
2. What risks do you see in relying too heavily on AI for medical advice?
3. Do you think AI could improve communication between doctors and patients? How?
4. How might AI widen or reduce inequality in health care access?
5. Where should the responsibility lie when AI gives harmful medical advice—developers, doctors, or users?
6. In your opinion, which area of health care most urgently needs improvement: access, cost, or quality of care?