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STUDY BY NATIONWIDE CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL

Touch-screen helps young patients talk to doctors

Monday, June 2, 2008 3:07 AM

By [Morgan Day](#)

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Turning a doctor's waiting room into an electronic chat room might be a key to getting teens help for risky behavior, according to a study by Nationwide Children's Hospital.

Health eTouch Pad is a 10-inch touch-screen computer that asks questions about health and behavior while patients are waiting to see a doctor.

The gadget, developed by Children's researchers, serves as a screening device, allowing doctors to ask questions that might be rushed or forgotten in an exam. The information is sent to a control site, where it is summarized and flagged to indicate concerns. Doctors could receive reports right away, to discuss in the exam, or days later.

The Children's Hospital study, in the June issue of *Pediatrics*, looked at nearly 900 patients ages 11 to 20 who used the wireless devices in clinic waiting rooms. It found that 59 percent of the patients screened positive for injury-risk behavior, depression or drug or alcohol use.

It also found that doctors who were given the results at the time of the exam identified problems in 68 percent of the patients who screened positive. When the results weren't given to doctors before the exam, problems were identified in 52 percent of those patients.

The doctors used the information to start a dialogue with patients, said Dr. Kelly Kelleher, one of the researchers and the director of the Center for Innovation in Pediatric Practices at Children's.

"It's important to know screenings on a computer are not replacements for doctors -- they're enhancements for doctors," Kelleher said.

Patients are more honest when answering questions electronically than face to face, he said. And the touch-screen makes them feel as if they're "playing a role in solving the problem."

It's difficult enough for teens to tell a doctor that they've been scratching an itchy rash, let alone that they've abused drugs or thought of suicide, said Rachel Lewis, 13, of Gahanna. She thinks that electronic screening would make young people more likely to admit to high-risk behaviors.

Dr. William Cotton, medical director of the Primary Care Network at Children's, participated in the study and found the eTouch especially helpful in determining severe depression in patients.

A key to the system, Cotton said, is allowing teens to answer questions privately, even if their parents are with them. Answers are more likely to be honest if the patients aren't worried about their parents seeing them.

Kelleher wants to make the Health eTouch system available to other hospitals and private practices after Children's finds partners to help with distribution and technical support.