

# 'Alexa, my head hurts': UK health service signs up Amazon

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The UK health department said it expected half of all symptom checks and other medical queries to be made through voice-assisted technology by next year

"Alexa, what are the symptoms of flu?"

The UK government said Wednesday that Britons will be able to get

answers to this and other medical queries from the National Health Service (NHS) using their Amazon smart speakers.

The state health system's tie-up with the US technology giant—billed as a world-first—drew praise from overworked doctors and professionals weary of bad medical advice proliferating online.

But privacy campaigners expressed alarm over the possibility of Amazon storing medical data and then using it to sell targeted ads.

"Technology like this is a great example of how people can access reliable, world-leading NHS advice from the comfort of their home, reducing the pressure on our hardworking GPs and pharmacists," Health Secretary Matt Hancock said in a statement.

Amazon said it began updating its Echo smart speakers to search NHS websites for medical answers at the start of the week.

More and more people are abandoning websites in favour of voice devices that use algorithms to scour online content and come up with answers in seconds.

The UK health department said it expected half of all symptom checks to be made through voice-assisted technology next year.

It added that the more reliable answers provided by the NHS would be especially helpful to the elderly and the blind.

Health professionals welcomed the government's embrace of shifting consumer habits.

"However, it is vital that independent research is done to ensure that the advice given is safe," Royal College of GPs chairwoman Helen Stokes-

Lampard said.

"Otherwise it could prevent people seeking proper medical help."

Some privacy campaigners have also expressed alarm about entrusting tech giants with sensitive enquiries.

"Encouraging the public to give their private health details to one of the most aggressive corporate data guzzlers is astonishingly misguided," said Big Brother Watch privacy group director Silkie Carlo.



Smart speakers, such as Amazon's Echo Dot pictured here, can respond to a wide variety of queries and are especially helpful to the elderly and the blind

"It's a data protection disaster waiting to happen."

Big Brother Watch additionally claimed that Amazon stores users' voice recordings in its data centres.

Amazon said in a letter to US Senator Chris Coons last month that its services "allow customers to see, hear, and delete the audio that was streamed to the cloud".

Coons has been investigating Amazon's data practices since last year.

## **'No patient data shared'**

The health department insists that Amazon will not be able to access Britons' medical records.

"No patient data is being shared with Amazon as part of this agreement," it said in a statement released to AFP.

"Amazon is not sharing any of this information with third parties, nor is it selling products or making product recommendations based on this health information, nor is it building a health profile on customers."

The policies Amazon outlined in the letter to Coons suggest that some written records of voice data interactions remain in its systems even after users delete the audio files.

"When a customer deletes a voice recording, we delete the transcripts associated with the customer's account of both of the customer's request and Alexa's response," the Amazon letter said.

"We already delete those transcripts from all of Alexa's primary storage systems, and we have an ongoing effort to ensure those transcripts do not

remain in any of Alexa's other storage systems."

It also reserved the right to "retain other records of customers' Alexa interactions".

The health department said Amazon was accessing the information for free and that similar services such as Google Assistant were also encouraged to sign up.

"This agreement with Amazon is not exclusive—we want to work with other technology providers on similar agreements," the health department said.

The NHS website offers basic advice on thousands of medical conditions and is one of the most popular symptom checkers in the world.

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