

“Second Life” Lets CDC Be Everywhere—All at Once

Just as CDC has rebuilt its bricks-and-mortar Atlanta headquarters to meet the needs of the future, the agency has also opened shop in a location a bit harder to find on any map. In August 2006, CDC set up its first test site for sharing public health information in an on-line, “cyber community.” The community is named Second Life and has more than 3.3 million members. CDC’s member of this community is named Hygeia Philo (“lover of health”). And just like CDC staff, Hygeia is the virtual public health worker in this “virtual CDC.”

The site offers health information to residents of Second Life as part of their online experience. CDC’s Second Life world is linked to www.cdc.gov—a “real world” wealth of information itself. And taking part in this virtual world simply requires a personal computer. Then, participants find a virtual world of interest and sign up. From there, they create an avatar (like CDC’s Hygeia) and begin exploring the environment and interacting with other “residents.”



Why Second Life? CDC’s work to advance public health means going where people are. As every virtual person represents a real person, CDC’s presence in Second Life offers yet another opportunity to learn and teach about public health. So, if there are thousands of people spending significant amounts of time online, where better to influence their health-related decision making? CDC messages of all kinds can be placed in this space for people to view passively or with which to become more actively engaged in efforts to improve their own health; and all of this in an environment of their own choosing.

Thanks to online metrics, CDC is also able to determine not only the types of information that people are seeking but how much time they spent reading about it and what information is subsequently sought. Second Life offers CDC the opportunity to develop a more complex portrait of how people seek, find, and use public health information—as opposed to simply a snapshot of some interaction between a member of the public and one particular database, etc. Presence in Second Life will allow CDC to refine what it offers through its websites and in response to public inquiries.



The average resident of Second Life is not the teenage male associated with typical gaming. The median age of a resident is 36; the mean age is 32. And 45% are women. Second Life is a new information channel and brings with it a new target demographic—one that is savvy to multiple communication technologies and highly selective in how it receives information.

As Second Life evolves, CDC’s presence will adapt to meet new and changing audience needs, just as it does in the real world. But one aspect of CDC’s mission will remain constant—healthy people in healthy places, both real and imagined.