



An Early Impact Analysis of Google's AI Overviews

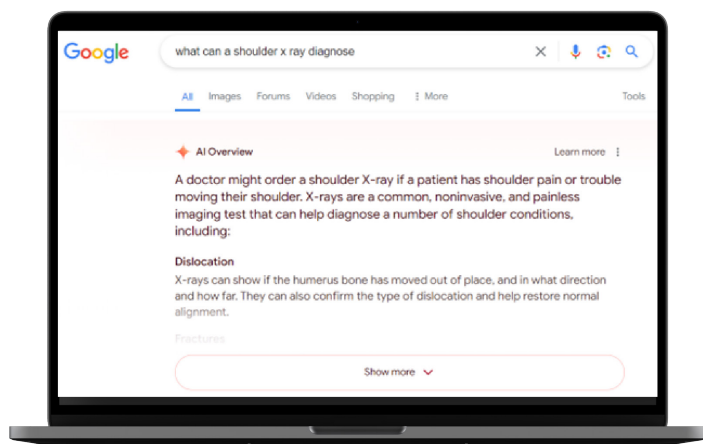
Introduction

On May 14, Google jolted the marketing world by announcing the [rollout of AI Overviews](#) across the United States. Since then, EVERSANA INTOUCH's SEO team has been actively working to understand the frequency, consistency and impact of this new search feature.

In this POV, we provide an overview of Google's new search feature, AI Overviews, along with the results from a 1,000-keyword study assessing the impact to SEO performance. These findings can help pharma marketers understand the magnitude of this update to prioritize their efforts accordingly.

A New Search Feature: AI Overviews

Whether you've witnessed them in your search results or heard about their [more embarrassing examples](#), by now you have probably seen an AI Overview.



An AI Overview is a Google search result feature that answers your query using generative AI. When one is present, it generally sits at the top of the search results and is partially exposed; searchers can select "Show more" to see the fully generated answer.

Before May 14, this was called Search Generative Experience (SGE), and users had to opt in to see it. Suffice it to say, the visibility level of this generative AI search integration before the announcement was minuscule.

Here are a few other observations about AI Overviews:

- They do not show up for most queries (more on that later).
- If you are not searching from a logged-in Google account, they will rarely appear (more on this later as well).
- They include organic links as sources, and some are often visible before the "Show more" link.
- Paid search results can also appear in them.

Keyword Study Methodology

Every major SEO keyword tracking tool uses private browsing (e.g., Private, Incognito). This is to avoid any personalized, less representative results. However, the SEO community quickly realized Incognito searches displayed significantly fewer AI Overviews. This meant the largest tools in the industry were unable to effectively track this new feature.

Instead of waiting on someone else, we managed to solve this problem ourselves. We sought the help of some of our best developers and gave clients initial assessments in record time.

The Methodology:

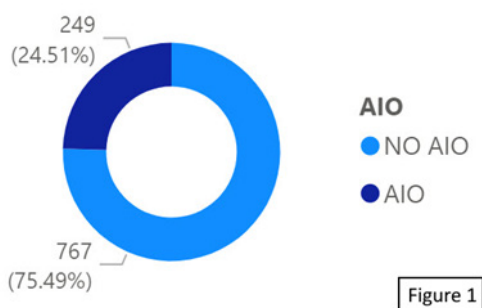
1. We selected 1,016 keywords across domains we currently manage. We chose keywords that drove the highest click volume to each website.
2. Using a custom-built application, these queries were searched automatically on May 29 and May 31 and scanned for AI Overviews.



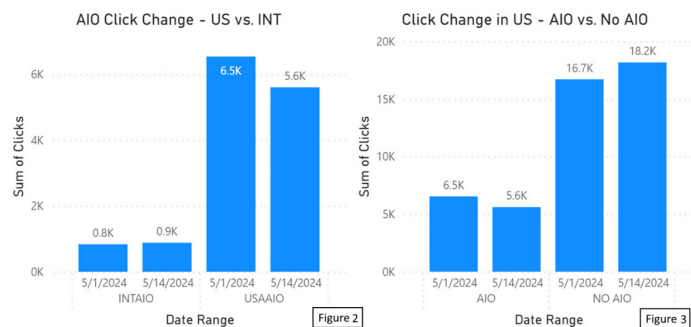
3. We retrieved keyword-level impression, click, country and device data from Google Search Console from our data warehouse.
4. We placed the keyword data in three groups: one test and two controls:
 - a. **Test** – Keywords that produced an AI Overview
 - b. **Control** – The same keywords as the test group above, except from international searches (where AI Overviews were still unavailable)
 - c. **Control** – The keywords we tested that did not produce an AI Overview (U.S. only)
5. We compared May 1-13 to May 14-26, 13 days before and after the announcement.

Organic Search Performance Effect

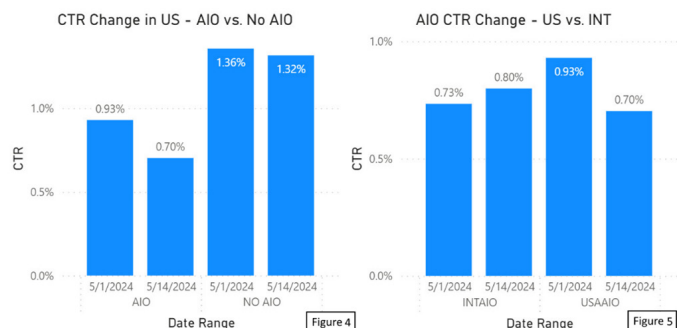
While we paid close attention over the past year when this feature was being tested, it was impossible to gather reliable benchmarks due to its wild inconsistency and limited exposure. Of the 1,016 keywords, **25% generated an AI Overview** when searched. However, if we had tested all keywords in our industry, we believe that percentage would have been even higher. Why? Google has stated AI Overviews are [used more often in complex queries](#). With specifically chosen high-click-driving keywords, they tend to be broader and simpler in nature.



From May 14 to 26, the number of **clicks to keywords that triggered AI Overviews decreased by 14%** from the previous 13 days. In Figures 1 and 2, both controls described in the methodology section stayed relatively flat. This gives us more confidence that the change in clicks was caused by AI Overviews.



Although clicks decreased by 14%, **the click-through rate (CTR) fell 25%**. The reason for this relative difference seems to be from higher impression volume (i.e., more people searching those terms) in the post-rollout time frame. And again, the controls were consistent pre- and post-rollout.



When the same keywords were searched again on May 31, 986 (97%) remained the same in their AI Overview presence. The remaining 30 were nearly split down the middle, as 14 no longer had an AI Overview and 16 began showing one.

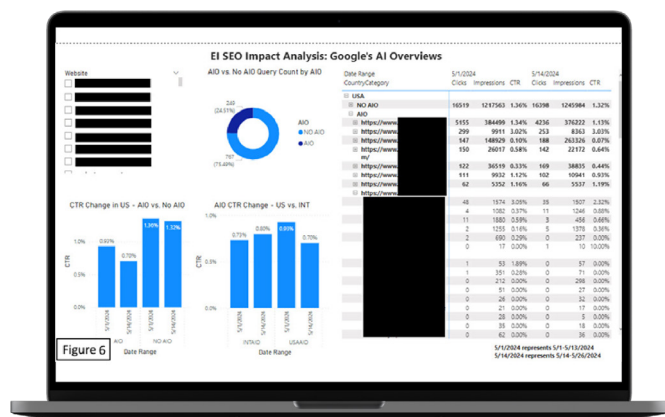
Overall Impact

As marketers, we must always balance today's realities with future speculations. This study aims to help separate hype from substance by quantifying the risks AI Overviews pose on SEO performance in the short term.

When estimating the overall impact, we can't say there was a drop in 14% of clicks, because most queries did not trigger an AI Overview and were essentially unaffected. With the noisiness of click data, we trusted the CTR decline slightly more as an indicator of performance impact. Using the CTR drop as a guide and considering the percentage of keywords is likely higher than the 25% measured, **the estimated total impact to Google organic search traffic is around 6%.**



However, this will vary considerably from site to site. Thanks to the expertise of our developers and the granularity of Google Search Console data accessible from our data warehouse, we created a customizable dashboard in Power BI (Figure 3) to investigate performance impacts at an individual site level.



Three Critical Caveats

There are three important caveats to best contextualize these results:

1. **The sample size was small and skewed.** A thousand keywords may seem sizeable until you realize the number of keywords our sites were visible for during those time frames was in the millions. Also, pulling from the highest-click-producing keywords was helpful in identifying any immediate performance risks, but it is not as representative as a random sampling would have been. Still, the stark contrast in performance against the control groups gives at least directional certainty of negative impact. Finally, the sites are exclusively in the pharma vertical, and the presence of AI Overviews can impact industries uniquely.
2. **AI Overviews were checked on only two days.** While 13 days of Google Search Console data was used to measure the post-rollout period, we cannot confirm it displayed AI Overviews the entire time. However, the fact that 97% of the keywords had not changed two days later gives confidence in the reliability of the results.
3. **This is a highly dynamic space.** After this study, Google finally responded to the growing negative

publicity it was receiving for some of its most deranged AI Overviews. Google mentioned some recent improvements to clean up quality, and while a reduction in the prevalence of AI Overviews wasn't explicitly stated, many SEO experts have anecdotally noticed a decline. Things can change from week to week, so this study may not effectively predict future impact.

Conclusion

As you move forward, here are four actionable steps to consider:

Measure – Track and measure the risk and opportunity of AI Overviews. This is your first step, and it is critical to understand how it is affecting your site(s) to inform how to address this challenge.

Prioritize – Once risk and opportunity are quantified, determine how much attention AI Overviews (or even SEO in general) deserve. That answer can help drive performance goals and investment choices.

Plan – Yesterday's SEO will only get you so far in this new environment. This isn't just Google adopting generative AI. The convergence is happening on both ends, as ChatGPT, Perplexity and other large language model (LLM) platforms are quickly adopting search engine-like features as well. To fully optimize for this, it involves more than SEO and your website. We recommend a working session with members from SEO, paid search, public relations, social media, creative and analytics to effectively evolve to this new reality.

Optimize – This is both the simplest and most difficult step. We recommend an iterative plan that accounts for the likelihood of this challenge.

EVERSANA INTOUCH's SEO team is continuously assessing industrywide changes that affect our clients in pharma marketing. Learn more about how we can help you navigate this change. Contact us to continue the conversation.

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