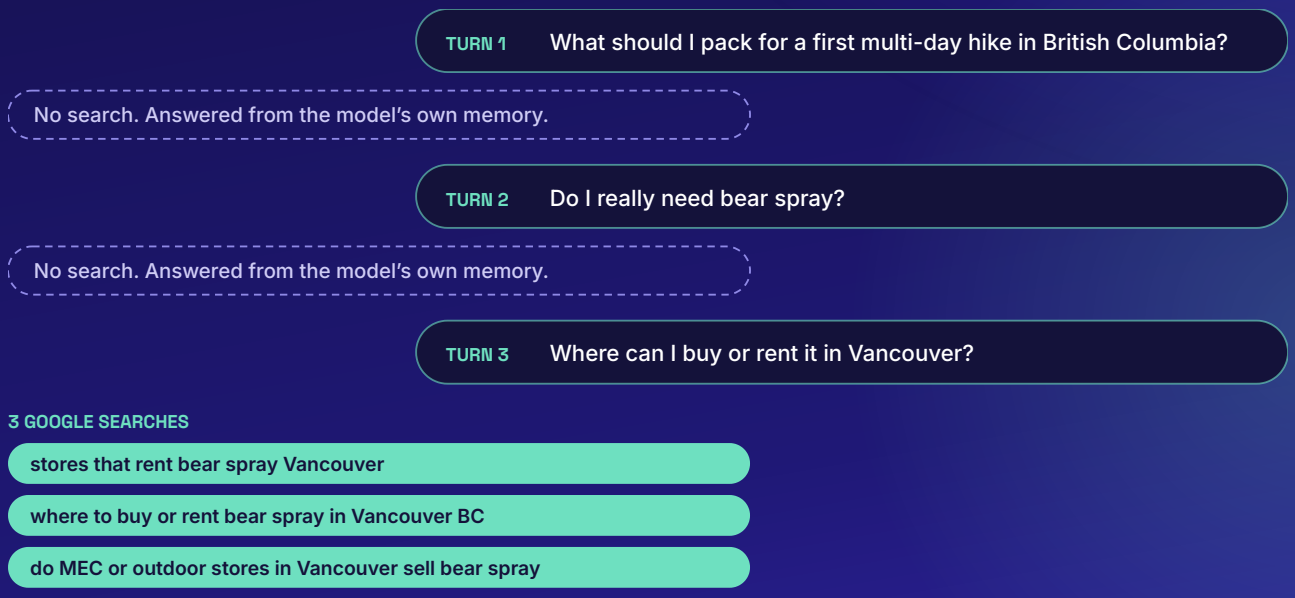
The Follow-Up Gap

Real AI conversations don’t stop at one question. I followed three of them, turn by turn, to see when the AI goes back to search, and when it doesn’t.



9 of 18
answers ran a Google search at all

15 of 15
follow-up searches carried the earlier topic

86%
of sources in follow-up answers were new

Data collected with Follow-Up Query Studio ↗

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3 conversations · 18 answers · 25 searches · 115 citations
Collected October 28, 2026

About this study

Study 7 in my independent AI search series. Here is the brief behind it, in four parts.

1

What it is

An independent study of **follow-up questions** in AI search: what happens on the second and third turn of a conversation, not just the first.

2

The goal

Find out **when the AI searches again** on a follow-up, how it rewrites short questions like “where can I buy it?”, and whether follow-ups cite new sources.

3

What we want to achieve

Show content teams that visibility is decided **across a conversation**, so a page should answer the likely next question, not only the first one.

4

The challenge

Follow-up searches are **invisible**, and my own tool could not see them either: its simulator only imagined searches and sources. Real measurement needed real search data.

How the challenge was solved: I upgraded my Follow-Up Query Studio so every turn runs through Gemini with Google Search grounding. It now records the searches Gemini actually ran and the sites it actually cited, turn by turn, and labels any answer that was not grounded.

The short version

I ran three outdoor gear conversations, three turns each, twice. Every answer was grounded in Google Search, and every search and citation was recorded.

9 of 18	**The AI often skips the search.** Only half the answers ran a Google search. The rest came from the model and the conversation so far, with no sources.
4 → 3 → 2	**Fewer searches as the chat goes on.** Searches happened on 4 of 6 first questions, 3 of 6 first follow-ups and 2 of 6 second follow-ups.
15 of 15	**Follow-ups are rewritten with context.** "Where can I buy it?" became a search for bear spray in Vancouver. Every follow-up search carried the earlier topic.
86%	**Follow-ups bring new sources.** When a follow-up did search, most of the sites it cited had not appeared earlier in the same conversation.
12 of 18	**The next question is predictable.** Care and re-waterproofing questions were suggested after 12 of 18 answers; bear safety in 13 of 18 BC suggestions.

What it means: winning the first question does not keep you in the conversation. Follow-ups either skip search, leaving no citation to win, or search again with new words and pick new sources. Pages that already answer the likely next question are best placed for both.

How the study worked

Short, natural follow-ups, the way people really talk to an assistant, including vague ones like “it” and “which one”.

1

Three conversations

A rain jacket, a first BC backpacking trip, and down vs synthetic insulation. Each has a first question and two follow-ups.

2

Run twice

Each conversation was run twice, turn by turn, with the earlier turns passed along as context.

3

Record each turn

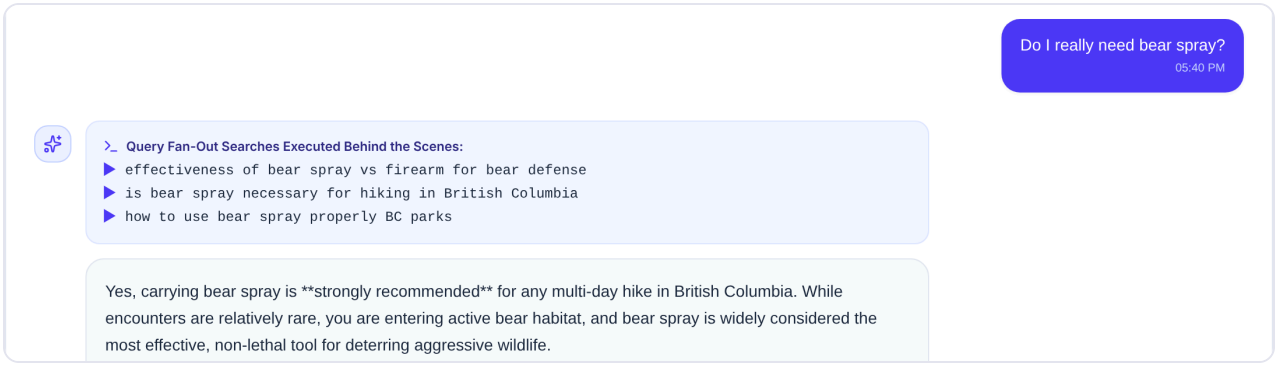
For every answer: whether it searched, the searches Gemini ran, the sites it cited, and its suggested next questions.

Topic	First question	Follow-up 1	Follow-up 2
Jacket	How do I choose a waterproof hiking jacket for hiking in Canada?	Is Gore-Tex worth the extra cost?	Which one should I buy for under $300 CAD?
BC hike	What should I pack for a first multi-day hike in British Columbia?	Do I really need bear spray?	Where can I buy or rent it in Vancouver?
Insulation	Down or synthetic insulation for wet weather in Canada?	What about hydrophobic down?	Which brands make the best one?

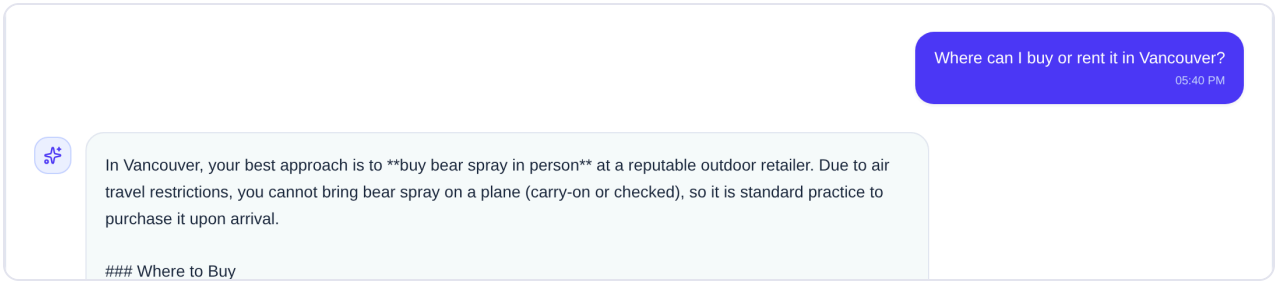
Collected on October 28, 2026, from Vancouver, with the Follow-Up Query Studio. Every one of the 18 answers came back grounded in Google Search (model: Gemini 3.1 Flash-Lite). Searches are the grounding queries Gemini reported; sources are the cited web pages, counted by site.

Inside the tool

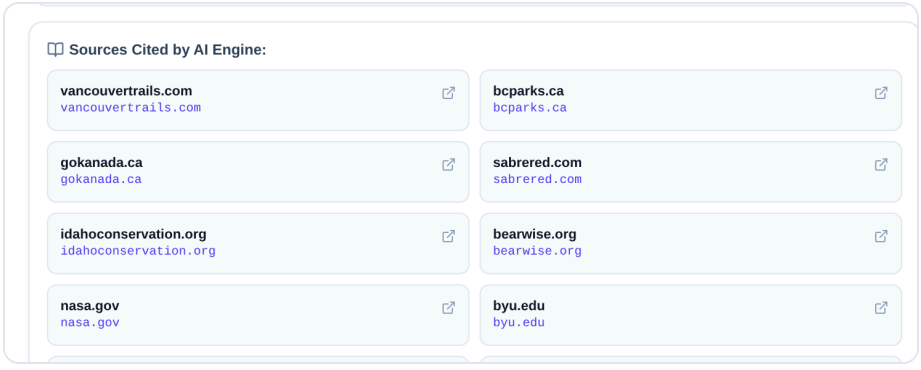
One live run of the BC conversation in the Follow-Up Query Studio, made for these screenshots and not counted in the 18 answers. The first follow-up searched; the second did not.



Turn 2, rewritten searches. The user typed six words. Gemini ran three searches that added British Columbia, BC Parks and a firearm comparison.



Turn 3, no search. "Where can I buy or rent it in Vancouver?" got a full answer naming MEC and Canadian Tire, with no searches and no sources.

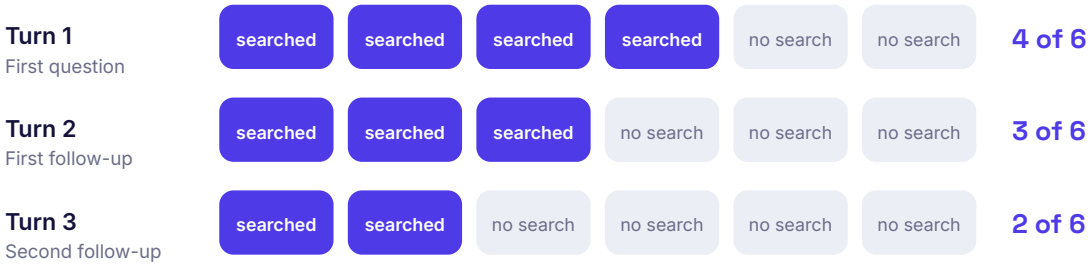


Turn 2, cited sites (top of the list of 16). bcparks.ca sits beside US sources; only vancouvertrails.com, canada.ca and Reddit carried over from turn 1.

Finding 1

The AI searches less as the chat goes on

Searching is the AI's choice. It searched on half the answers, and less often with each follow-up.



Each box is one answer. 3 conversations, each run twice.

No search, no citation

Nine answers ran no search and cited no sources, yet each was a full answer of 240 to 400 words. Those answers had no citation slot to win.

Even first questions vary

The same opening question searched in one run and not in the other, for both the jacket and the BC trip. One run says little about what the AI will do next time.

Finding 2

Follow-ups are rewritten with the conversation

When the AI did search on a follow-up, it never searched the words the user typed. It added the topic from earlier turns.

What the user asked	What the AI searched (first of three)
“Is Gore-Tex worth the extra cost?”	benefits of Gore-Tex vs other waterproof membranes for hiking
“Is Gore-Tex worth the extra cost?”	when is gore-tex worth the money for hiking jackets
“Which one should I buy for under $300 CAD?”	best value waterproof shells for hiking under 300 CAD
“Where can I buy or rent it in Vancouver?”	stores that rent bear spray Vancouver
“What about hydrophobic down?”	hydrophobic down vs synthetic insulation for wet weather

Vague words get resolved

“It” became bear spray. “Which one” became waterproof hiking jackets. “Is Gore-Tex worth it” gained “for hiking jackets”. All 15 follow-up searches carried the earlier topic.

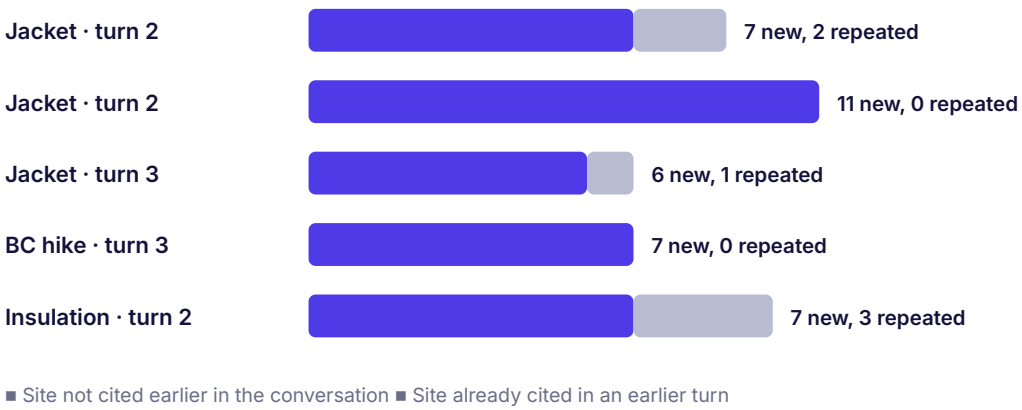
Your page needs the full context

The search behind a short follow-up is long and specific. A page that names the product, the use and the place matches it; a page that only answers the short phrase does not.

Finding 3

Follow-ups bring in new sources

A follow-up that searches does not reuse the first answer's sources. 86% of the sites it cited were new to the conversation.



A second chance, or a second loss

A site missing from the first answer can still be cited on the follow-up, and a site cited first can drop out. Each searched turn is its own competition.

Reddit stays in the conversation

Reddit was cited in 8 of the 9 answers that cited sources, across all three topics and all three turns.

Turns shown are follow-ups that ran a search. "Repeated" means the site had been cited in an earlier turn of the same conversation run.

Finding 4

The next question is predictable

After every answer, the tool records the three follow-ups the AI expects next. The same needs came up again and again.

Topic	Follow-up the AI kept suggesting	How often
Jackets and insulation	How to wash, clean or re-waterproof (DWR) the jacket	After 12 of 18 answers
BC hike	Bear safety: storing food, meeting a bear, high-risk areas	13 of 18 suggestions
Jackets	Layering under a rain shell, and Canadian brands or retailers	In both runs
Insulation	Whether a shell over insulation helps in wet weather	In both runs

Answer the next question on the same page

A jacket buying guide that also covers care and re-waterproofing already holds the answer to the most likely follow-up.

Plan content as a conversation

Map the first question, then the two or three follow-ups that keep appearing, and link them, so each turn has a page that matches it.

What content teams can do

Treat visibility as a conversation, not a single query.

Cover the likely follow-ups

Answer the next two or three questions on the page or one click away.

The evidence: Care and re-waterproofing were suggested after 12 of 18 answers.

Spell out the full context

Name the product, the use and the place, so long rewritten searches match.

The evidence: All 15 follow-up searches added the earlier topic.

Win each turn separately

Do not assume a first-turn citation carries through the conversation.

The evidence: 86% of follow-up sources were new to the conversation.

Be worth searching for

Fresh, local and specific details give the AI a reason to search instead of answering from memory.

The evidence: Only 9 of 18 answers searched at all.

Expect community voices

Real discussion of your products shows up turn after turn.

The evidence: Reddit was cited in 8 of 9 answers with sources.

Test whole conversations

Run follow-ups, not only first questions, and repeat runs.

The evidence: The same first question searched in one run and not the other.

Limits, and the series

Read this as a snapshot

- **Small sample.** Three conversations, run twice, 18 answers, one evening.
- **One engine, one model.** Gemini 3.1 Flash-Lite with Google Search grounding, through my own tool. ChatGPT, Perplexity and Google AI Mode may behave differently.
- **Fixed follow-ups.** I wrote the follow-ups in advance so runs could be compared. Real users would react to each answer.
- **Context passed by the tool.** Earlier turns were passed back as short summaries, the way the app sends them.
- **Suggested follow-ups are predictions.** They show what the AI expects users to ask next, not what users actually asked.

The complete series

Study 1, The AI Shelf: which brands AI recommends. **Study 2, Who Are You, Really?:** brand consistency. **Study 3, Does Size Buy Trust?:** E-E-A-T by brand size. **Study 4, Absorbed, Not Credited:** when AI credits sources. **Study 5, Built to Be Retrieved:** structure and passage retrieval. **Study 6, Same Question, Different Searches:** how much fan-out changes. **Study 7, this report:** what happens on follow-up questions.

Independent research

This is an independent analysis of AI answers collected with a tool I built. I have not worked with, or been endorsed by, any company mentioned. Brands and retailers named here appear only because the AI searched for or cited them.

SEO Girl

Where AI meets search, I make brands visible.

Ameneh Saeednia is a Senior SEO and Generative Search Strategist with more than nine years of experience across e-commerce, international education and travel. She specializes in entity SEO, E-E-A-T and AI visibility.

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