

Addictive screen habits harm early adolescent mental health



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By [Elsevier](#)

New research following US adolescents ages 11–12 shows that problematic use of mobile phones, social media, and video games was associated with higher risks of mental health problems, sleep disturbance, and suicidal behaviors one year later.

The study in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, published by Elsevier, reveals that the links between problematic screen use and mental health are stronger than those previously reported for overall screen time and highlights the risks of addictive use.

Screen use increases rapidly during early adolescence, which is also a critical window when mental health challenges, sleep problems, and substance use often begin to emerge. An estimated 49.5% of adolescents in the US have experienced mental illness.

While much of the prior research has focused on overall screen time or older adolescents, this research focused on problematic, addiction-like patterns of screen use in early adolescence and whether they are associated with later adverse health outcomes.

Problematic screen use is when kids can't control their time online, even if they try, and it starts to cause stress, conflicts, or problems at school or home. It can also lead to withdrawal-like feelings, needing more time online to feel satisfied, and repeated relapses, much like other addictive behaviors."

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Analyzed data from 8,000 participants

The researchers analyzed data from over 8,000 participants in the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) Study, the largest long-term study of brain development and child health in the US, following youth from ages 11–12 to one year later.

The study found that problematic mobile phone and social media use were prospectively associated with higher depressive, somatic, attention/deficit, oppositional defiant, and conduct problems scores; suicidal behaviors; sleep disturbance; and substance initiation.

Problematic video game use was associated with higher depressive, attention/deficit, and oppositional defiant scores; suicidal behaviors; and sleep disturbance.

This study addresses key evidence gaps highlighted by the US Surgeon General in a 2023 Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health by using a prospective design, focusing on early adolescents, and examining problematic screen use rather than screen time alone.

Responding to ongoing concerns about youth mental health and the rapid rise of digital media use at younger ages, this study's findings are poised to shape future health policy and clinical practice. The results underpin the necessity of interventions specifically tailored to early adolescents, as this is a critical period during which psychological vulnerabilities often first manifest.

Dr. Nagata points out, "Not all screen time is harmful. The real risk comes when use becomes addictive or problematic, when kids can't stop, feel stressed if they don't use it, or it starts to disrupt sleep, mood, or daily life."

"Our findings suggest that digital platforms and families alike should consider ways to reduce addictive features of apps and social media, since these patterns of use are modifiable and can affect adolescent mental health," he concludes.

Source:

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Nagata, J. M., *et al.* (2026) Prospective Associations Between Early Adolescent Problematic Screen Use, Mental Health, Sleep, and Substance Use. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. DOI:10.1016/j.amepre.2025.108248. [https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797\(25\)00716-0/fulltext](https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797(25)00716-0/fulltext)

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