Recognize and treat Internet addiction

June 18 2013, by Dr. Hatim Omar & Dr. Stephanie Stockburger

(Medical Xpress)—Do you stay up late into the night using the Internet? Are you grumpy or anxious when you cannot log on? Do you feel the need to use the Internet more and more to feel satisfied? Do you stay online longer than you intended? Is your Internet use interfering with your social life, work, or academic performance? Do you continue to use the Internet despite family conflict about your use? Have you lied in order to conceal your involvement with the Internet?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you may be suffering from Internet addiction.

Internet addiction is characterized by excessive use or many hours spent in non-work technology-related computer, Internet, or video game use.

According to an article titled, "Internet Addiction: A Brief Summary of Research and Practice" recently published in *Current Psychiatry Reviews*, symptoms of Internet addiction include:

- Changes in mood
- Preoccupation with the Internet and digital media
- Inability to control the amount of time spent interfacing with digital technology
- The need for more time or a new game to achieve a desired mood
- Withdrawal when not engaged with digital technology
- Diminishing social life
- Adverse work and academic consequences

Internet addiction can be difficult to diagnose. The committee in charge of creating the newest version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM 5) considered including Internet addiction as a diagnosis but decided instead to characterize it as an area requiring further research. Because Internet addiction does not have standard diagnostic criteria, it is difficult to know how prevalent Internet addiction is.

The reported prevalence rate of Internet addiction varies from 0.3 percent to 38 percent of the population. Internet addiction is much more widely diagnosed in Europe and Asia, which are also more advanced than the United States in the treatment of Internet addiction. The goal of treatment is to learn to use the Internet in moderation as opposed to abstaining completely.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has published guidelines regarding media in children and teens on their website at AAP.org called "Media and Children."

According to the AAP, excessive media use can lead to attention problems, school difficulties, sleep and eating disorders, and obesity.

Parents and guardians can help their children learn to use the Internet wisely by having rules about use. Those rules include:

- No computer in the bedroom
- Set a good example regarding appropriate use
- Offer non-electronic educational materials
- Set total "screen time" (including Internet, television, cell phones and electronic games) to no more than one to two hours per day. In addition, children under two years of age should not have access to "screen time" since their brains are developing rapidly during this time period and children learn by interacting with people, not screens