

Many teens suffer 'cyber' dating abuse, study suggests

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Photo: U.S. National
Institutes of Health

Researcher said the participants were part of 'high-risk' population.

(HealthDay)—Many teens are abused online by the people they're dating, a new study suggests.

This [abuse](#) can include being monitored, stalked, threatened and harassed through hurtful comments, the researchers said.

The findings were based on surveys of teens who visited northern California school health clinics, and don't hint at how common this kind of abuse among teens is overall.

But the study does suggest that females, non-whites and bisexuals are most vulnerable. In addition, "these numbers clearly show that 'cyber

[dating](#) abuse' is common," said study author Rebecca Dick, a clinical research coordinator of the Center for Adolescent and Young Adult Health at the University of Pittsburgh.

"We need to support prevention efforts that increase education about the many different forms of abuse in adolescent relationships, and to encourage parents, teachers, coaches and others to talk to young people about what healthy relationships look like," she added.

The researchers launched their study to better understand the frequency of cyber dating abuse in teens and its implications. Evidence has already shown that cyber dating abuse is linked to physical, sexual and [psychological abuse](#), Dick said.

The study authors surveyed slightly more than 1,000 teens aged 14 to 19 who visited on-campus [health clinics](#) from 2012 to 2013 in search of care for issues such as [sexually transmitted diseases](#), birth control and annual checkups. The schools were located in urban and suburban areas, and 95 percent of the participants were not white.

More than 40 percent of the teens said they'd experienced cyber dating abuse within the past three months: 45 percent of females and 31 percent of males. The numbers were highest among non-whites (between 37 percent and 44 percent), those dating more than one person (61 percent), and bisexuals (56 percent).

The most common types of abuse were stalking (repeatedly contacting a person to ask what he or she was doing or whom he or she was with) and making mean and hurtful comments. Eight percent said they received threatening or aggressive comments, the investigators found.

"We found that teens exposed to cyber dating abuse were more likely to also experience other forms of physical and sexual dating abuse like

being hit, pushed, slapped, choked or otherwise physically hurt by a dating partner," Dick said.

She cautioned that this group of students doesn't represent teens as a whole. "These are teens that are seeking health care, which we know is a group of youth who tend to have riskier health behaviors," she explained.

Brian Mustanski, an associate professor with the department of medical social sciences at Northwestern University who studies bullying, noted that almost one in three teens said they were asked to send nude or seminude pictures of themselves. (The study didn't consider this to be cyber dating abuse.)

"Many teens would struggle with how to respond to such a request and may not be aware of the repercussions of sending such pictures," Mustanski said. "Given how frequently these requests are happening, it is important that parents address this with their children and help them develop the skills to appropriately respond."

Study author Dick also suggested that parents treat each other with respect so their kids can learn from them as role models. "The second thing that we advise is for parents to stay involved in their teen's lives," she said.

"This form of abuse can be easily hidden so it is important to keep asking questions and trying to maintain an open and non-judgmental dialogue with their teen," Dick advised.

What about taking away [teens'](#) phones?

Robert Faris, an associate professor of sociology at the University of California, Davis, said: "It would probably be easier to forbid them to date than to take away their smartphones. Neither seems realistic to me."

Faris, who was not involved with the study, suggested that "what parents should do is help their kids identify toxic relationships, and [help them] learn the skills and gain the confidence to resist falling into such situations, and to seek help when needed."

The study was published online Nov. 17 and will appear in the December print issue of the journal *Pediatrics*.

More information: For more about teen dating harassment, visit the [Urban Institute](#).

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