

# Greater social media use tied to higher risk of eating and body image concerns

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Logging on to social media sites frequently throughout the week or spending hours trolling various social feeds during the day is linked to a greater risk of young adults developing eating and body image concerns, a University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine analysis discovered.

Gender, specific age, race and income did not influence the association; the study found that all demographic groups were equally affected by the link between social media and eating and [body image concerns](#), indicating that preventative messages should target a broad population. The results are reported in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* and the research was funded by the National Cancer Institute (NCI).

"We've long known that exposure to traditional forms of media, such as fashion magazines and television, is associated with the development of disordered eating and body image concerns, likely due to the positive portrayal of 'thin' models and celebrities," said lead author Jaime E. Sidani, Ph.D., M.P.H., assistant director of Pitt's Center for Research on Media, Technology and Health. "Social media combines many of the visual aspects of traditional media with the opportunity for social media users to interact and propagate stereotypes that can lead to eating and body image concerns."

Dr. Sidani and her colleagues sampled 1,765 U.S. adults ages 19 through 32 in 2014, using questionnaires to determine social media use. The questionnaires asked about the 11 most popular social media platforms at the time: Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Google Plus, Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit, Tumblr, Pinterest, Vine and LinkedIn.

They cross-referenced those results with the results of another questionnaire that used established screening tools to assess eating disorder risk.

Eating disorders include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, [binge eating disorder](#) and other clinical and mental health issues where people have a distorted body image and disordered eating. These issues disproportionately affect adolescents and young adults. However, more general disordered eating, body dissatisfaction, and negative or altered body image likely affect a broader group of individuals.

The participants who spent the most time on social media throughout the day had 2.2 times the risk of reporting eating and body image concerns, compared to their peers who spent less time on social media. And participants who reported most frequently checking social media throughout the week had 2.6 times the risk, compared with those who checked least frequently.

Senior author Brian A. Primack, M.D., Ph.D., assistant vice chancellor for health and society in Pitt's Schools of the Health Sciences, noted that the analysis could not determine whether social media use was contributing to eating and body image concerns or vice versa - or both.

"It could be that [young adults](#) who use more social media are exposed to more images and messages that encourage development of disordered eating," he said.

Previous research has shown that people tend to post images online that present themselves positively. For example, users are likely to select the scant few that may make them appear thinner from hundreds of more "accurate" photographs of themselves, resulting in others being exposed to unrealistic expectations for their appearance.

"Conversely, people who have eating and body image concerns might then be turning to social media to connect with groups of people who also have these concerns," said Dr. Primack. "However, connecting with these groups for social support could inhibit recovery because of the desire to continue being a part of the shared identity such social media groups foster."

In an effort to battle social media-fueled eating disorders, Instagram banned the hashtags 'thinspiration' and 'thinspo,' but users easily circumvented these barriers by spelling the words slightly differently. YouTube videos about anorexia nervosa that could be classified as "pro-anorexia" received higher viewer ratings than informative videos highlighting the health consequences of the eating disorder.

"More research is needed in order to develop effective interventions to counter social media content that either intentionally or unintentionally increases the risk of eating disorders in users," said Dr. Sidani. "We suggest studies that follow users over time and seek to answer the cause-and-effect questions surrounding [social media](#) use and risk for eating and [body image](#) concerns."

Provided by University of Pittsburgh Schools of the Health Sciences

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