

Researcher finds that pandemic led to increase in internet addiction among American adults

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Millions of Americans turned to technology—especially the internet—to work, communicate and pass the time in lockdown during the pandemic.

Yet, little is known in the United States about the effects of growing internet usage.

Now, new research from a public health professor at New Mexico State University shows more than half of the adult population in the U.S. is either at risk of addiction or severely addicted to the [internet](#)—a behavioral health issue tied to [depression](#) and anxiety.

Jagdish Khubchandani, a public health professor at NMSU, conducted a first-of-its-kind national study assessing the relationship between internet addiction and psychological outcomes a year into the pandemic. The study included more than 1,300 participants.

Khubchandani used novel methods to classify study participants into internet addiction categories based on graded and incremental dependence on the internet within the past year.

The study findings, published in *Psychiatry International*, showed 45 percent of the participants had no internet addiction. However, 41 percent had probable addiction or were at risk for addiction, while the remaining 14 percent had definite or severe addiction.

Khubchandani also found that more than a quarter of the entire study group reported having depression (28 percent) or anxiety (25 percent).

"Despite such rigorous analysis, we found that internet addiction could be linked to [mental health issues](#), and our study showed that 14 percent of adults had severe internet addiction," Khubchandani said. "The pandemic has led to an increase in serious internet addiction that is linked with depression and anxiety."

After participants completed the study's questionnaire, Khubchandani identified three internet addiction statements that received the highest

agreement scores in the sample group:

- "I used internet devices longer than I planned to."
- "I routinely cut short my sleep to spend more time online."
- "I felt restless, tense, frustrated or irritated when I could not use the internet or use it as long as I wanted."

Khubchandani pointed out that these behaviors indicate addiction and dependence.

Compared with participants who did not have internet addiction, those who had probable addiction were 2.3 times more likely to have depression and 1.9 times more likely to have anxiety. In contrast, individuals who had definite or severe addiction were 9.7 times more likely to have depression, 9.2 times more likely to have anxiety and 13.5 times more likely to have both depression and anxiety.

"Our findings indicate a graded and dose-response relationship between internet addiction and mental health issues," Khubchandani said. "Higher severity of internet addiction was associated with higher symptom burden of anxiety, depression or both anxiety and depression. Studies often classify individuals as addicted or not, but we created multiple categories of addiction to understand problematic [internet usage](#) better and identify groups at [risk of addiction](#) or those who are definitely addicted."

Before the pandemic, Khubchandani said evidence suggested that the prevalence of internet addiction in American adults ranged from 1 percent to 10 percent, with an average of 8 percent adults seriously addicted at any given time.

Khubchandani said those with internet [addiction](#) should consider specific strategies to lessen dependency. His top recommendations include

regulating technology use, limiting social and mass media information, setting boundaries between work and home life, and spending time outdoors or with family members.

He added that many individuals will enter a "vicious cycle" of sedentary behaviors, loneliness, increased internet usage, and depression or [anxiety](#) during the holiday season.

"It's that [time](#) of the year when we have to be watchful of our lifestyles," he said. "While these strategies may help many, some individuals having [internet addiction](#) may end up with serious psychological distress or coping problems requiring clinical and behavioral health services that should be sought without delay."

More information: Jagdish Khubchandani et al, COVID-19 Pandemic and the Burden of Internet Addiction in the United States, *Psychiatry International* (2021). [DOI: 10.3390/psychiatryint2040031](https://doi.org/10.3390/psychiatryint2040031)

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