

Excessive television viewing in childhood may be a risk factor for later smoking and gambling disorders

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Excessive television viewing as a child can lead to a higher risk of tobacco use and gambling disorders in adulthood, a new University of Otago study shows.

The research is published in the *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*.

The researchers used unique, follow-up data from the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study (known as the Dunedin Study) to investigate how television viewing in childhood was related to the risk of having a [substance use disorder](#) or disordered [gambling](#) in adulthood.

Study author Dr. Helena McAnally says that the study indicates that excessive leisure time television viewing between the age of 5 and 15, may be a risk factor for the development of later disorders.

"People often talk of television viewing as an addiction; this research indicates that, for some people, television viewing may be an early expression of an addictive disorder or may lead to later substance-related and other addictive disorders," she says.

Spending time watching television during childhood and adolescence was associated with a higher risk of alcohol, tobacco, cannabis disorders and disordered gambling in adulthood. For tobacco and gambling, these associations were independent of other potential influences on these outcomes such as sex, [socioeconomic status](#), and measures of childhood

self-control.

Co-author Professor Bob Hancox says excessive leisure time television viewing in [childhood](#) and adolescence has been associated with a range of poorer adult health and well-being outcomes, but "to our knowledge this research is among the first to assess how a common, but potentially addictive behavior, such as [television](#) viewing is related to later substance disorder and disordered gambling."

The study highlights the potential need for guidance on digital health and well-being, he says.

"Public health agencies have put great effort into advocating for safer alcohol use and safe sexual practices; similar campaigns could be used to advocate for safe screen use. The American Academy of Pediatrics' previous recommendation of a daily average limit of two hours of screen time may remain a reasonable guide for leisure-time screen time in children and adolescents," Professor Hancox says.

More information: H. M. McAnally et al, The Longitudinal Association of Childhood and Adolescent Television Viewing with Substance Use Disorders and Disordered Gambling in Adulthood up to Age 45, *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* (2022). [DOI: 10.1007/s11469-022-00918-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-022-00918-7)

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