

Screen time and social media use linked to eating disorder symptoms in young adolescents

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As adolescents continue to spend more time on screens and social media, a new study finds that among 9–14-year-olds, excessive time online is

associated with a higher risk of having eating disorder symptoms.

These symptoms include worrying about gaining weight, tying one's self-worth to weight, compensatory behaviors to prevent [weight gain](#), [binge eating](#), and experiencing distress over binge eating.

The study is [published](#) in the journal *Eating and Weight Disorders—Studies on Anorexia, Bulimia and Obesity*.

"Social media promotes constant comparisons to peers and exposure to unattainable body ideals," says senior author Jason M. Nagata, MD, an associate professor of pediatrics at the University of California, San Francisco. "This can contribute to dissatisfaction with one's own body, reduced [self-esteem](#), and unhealthy attempts to control weight, all of which increase the risk of developing eating disorders and other mental health issues."

Problematic social media and [mobile phone use](#), characterized by dependence that impairs daily life, are also associated with eating disorder symptoms. Social media overconsumption may not only increase exposure to body ideals and comparisons, but may also intensify impulsive behaviors, reinforce binge eating, and contribute to addictive tendencies.

"Adolescents should limit social media that encourages eating disorders and appearance comparisons. Parents can play an important role by developing Family Media Use Plans and holding open conversations about problematic screen use and disordered eating concerns," says Nagata.

The study builds on existing knowledge surrounding [eating disorders](#) in adolescents, which have among the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric disorder. The study uses data from the nationwide

Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) study, the largest long-term study of brain development in the United States. The study collected data for 11,875 children aged 9–14 years old. Study participants provided information about their typical screen habits, as well as whether they had experienced eating disorder symptoms.

"This study underscores the need for more research on the relationship between [social media](#), problematic screen use, and mental well-being in [early adolescence](#)," says co-author Kyle T. Ganson, Ph.D., assistant professor at the University of Toronto's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. "Future research should focus on identifying specific types of content that pose the greatest risk for young people developing eating disorder symptoms."

More information: Jonathan Chu et al, Screen time, problematic screen use, and eating disorder symptoms among early adolescents: findings from the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) Study, *Eating and Weight Disorders - Studies on Anorexia, Bulimia and Obesity* (2024). [DOI: 10.1007/s40519-024-01685-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40519-024-01685-1)

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