



Studies Highlight Potential Long-term Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Teens

Description

A June study by researchers from the University of Sydney highlighted concerning trends of increased screen time, alcohol use, and poor sleep for teenagers due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The increase has implications for teens' long-term health, said researchers.

“We know these lifestyle risk behaviors are common among young people, but we also know they are key predictors of chronic diseases later in life, such as cancer, cardiovascular disease and mental disorders,” said lead author Dr. Lauren Gardner, Research Fellow at the University’s Matilda Centre for Research Excellence in Mental Health and Substance Use.

The authors of the study expressed special concern at an observed increase in alcohol consumption, recreational screen time, and insufficient sleep, particularly in girls.

The study examined survey responses from almost 1,000 Australian teens across the states of New South Wales, Queensland, and Western Australia, with the cohort age averaging 12.6 years old.

Researchers compared responses over the 2-year period from pre-pandemic 2019 to 2021, during the pandemic. The authors compared trends in six key lifestyle behaviors that put teens at risk of chronic disease in later life. These include physical inactivity, poor diet, recreation screen time, inadequate sleep, alcohol use, and smoking.

Overall, the team found an 8 percent increase in teenagers engaging in recreational screen time for more than two hours a day. Ninety-four percent of surveyed teens reported excessive levels of recreational screen time during the pandemic, compared to 86 percent pre-pandemic.

A 2021 study conducted in the United States reported similar findings, with average screen use found to be 7.7 hours per day; almost double respondents’ pre-pandemic estimate of 3.8 hours.

“As screen time increased, so did adolescents’ worry and stress, while their coping abilities declined,” lead author Dr. Jason Nagata said.

“Though social media and video chat can foster social connection and support, we found that most of the adolescents’ screen use during the pandemic didn’t serve this purpose,” said Nagata.

In addition to the screen time increase, a greater number of teens reported alcohol consumption: an increase from 2 percent to 10 percent of survey respondents. While researchers expected an increase in alcohol consumption as the cohort aged; they were surprised to find that it was greater for females than males.

Sleep duration was reported to have increased from 2019 to 2021. However, insufficient sleep—sleep duration below 8 to 11 hours—was still more prevalent for females compared to males, with around an extra third of female respondents reporting insufficient sleep.

Other risk factors such as smoking, poor diet, and physical inactivity also reported increases. Researchers say the increases, although associated with the pandemic, were not significant.

Prof. Maree Teesson, director of the Matilda Centre, said the new study reinforces other international research highlighting the varied impact of the COVID-19 pandemic across countries and within regions.

“Supporting young people to improve or maintain positive health behaviors is important,” she said. “The full extent of the impact of the pandemic on children and young people is being recognized internationally.”

By Marina Zhang

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