

## - Gadgets

**Do kids need a screen break?**

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IS YOUR child or teenager seemingly always glued to their smartphone?



If you've ever wondered how this might be impacting them, you're not alone.

According to a new study presented at the 60th Annual European Society for Paediatric Endocrinology meeting, the blue light emitted from phone and tablet screens may alter hormone levels, and increase the chance of early puberty.

Researchers believe this is linked to how blue light suppresses the secretion of melatonin – a hormone that helps control the sleep cycle.

Researcher Dr Aylin Kilinc Ugurlu, from Ankara City Hospital in Turkey, said: "As this is a rat study, we can't be sure that these findings would be replicated in children, but these data suggest that blue light exposure could be considered as a risk factor for earlier puberty onset."

So, how else might screens and smartphones be having an affect?

**SLEEP**

According to a 2020 study published in the Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine, "Excessive smartphone use was related to shorter total sleep time in children".

Overuse was classed as more than an hour a day.

Quality of sleep was found to be reduced, as well as quantity.

"The blue light stemming from electronic devices can affect children's sleep, particularly when used close to bedtime, as they affect the production of melatonin," says Dr Maite Ferrin, consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist at Re:Cognition Health (recognitionhealth.com).

She advises a decrease, or ideally cease using electronic devices and smartphones before bed, and avoid long periods of use during the day.

**ANXIETY AND CONCENTRATION**

A 2018 study published in the Preventative Medicine Reports suggested that "more hours of screen time are associated with lower wellbeing in ages two to 17", and "high users of screens [seven-plus hours a day] show less curiosity, self-control, and emotional stability".

Among 14- to 17-year-olds, those classed as high users of screens were found to be more than twice as likely to have been diagnosed with anxiety or depression.

Jasmine Eskenzi, founder of The Zensory (thezensory.com), a wellbeing and productivity app, says: "There are ways of using smartphones in a positive way, to empower people to learn preventative mental health strategies such as mindfulness, meditation and positive thinking. If we can encourage young people to engage more with the healthy educational content, inspiring communities, and wildly empowering capabilities of smartphones – we can see young people thriving and not just surviving."

Dr Ferrin adds: "The prolonged use of devices also reduces the attention span in children and may impact other functions of the brain, including our ability to remember things. Using smartphones in moderation and establishing boundaries with children is key to reducing these symptoms."

**EYES**

"Overusing smartphones could be detrimental to the vision of children and people of all ages," says Dr Ferrin. "Excess stress can be placed on the eyes, which can cause fluctuating vision, eye strain, eye fatigue, headaches, as well as neck, shoulder and back pain.

"Overuse of smartphones could potentially increase the risk of ocular symptoms such as myopia [short-sightedness] and ocular surface disease, leading to dry eye syndrome and blepharitis."

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