

- Screen time

## Teenagers should limit time online, study says

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TEENAGERS should consider setting limits for how much time they spend online each day, academics have said, after a new study found that internet addiction may have detrimental effects on the brains of youngsters.

Internet addiction can cause “negative behavioural and developmental changes” in the brains of adolescents, the experts said.

These changes could mean teenagers struggle to maintain relationships and social activities, and lie about online activity. Teens addicted to the internet could also experience disrupted sleep and develop irregular eating patterns, the researchers said.

It comes after experts found that internet addiction appears to alter the connections between the brain networks in teenagers.

Researchers from University College London examined data from 12 studies from Korea, China and Indonesia involving 237 youngsters aged 10 to 19 who had been diagnosed with an internet addiction.

The issue has been defined by researchers as a person’s inability to resist the urge to use the internet which has negative effects on their psychological wellbeing as well as their social, academic and professional lives.

All of the youngsters involved in the study had brain scans to examine how the regions of the brain interact with each other - also known as functional connectivity - while they were resting and completing a task.

The team found that a number of regions of the brain appeared to be affected by internet addiction.

This include a mixture of increased and decreased activity in the parts of the brain that are activated when the people studied were resting and a decrease in the functional connectivity in the parts of the brain involved in active thinking.

Academics said these changes can be linked to addictive behaviours as well as behaviour changes associated with intellectual ability, physical coordination, mental health and development.

“Given the influx of technology and media in the lives and education of children and adolescents, an increase in prevalence and focus on internet-related behavioural changes is imperative towards future children/adolescent mental health,” the authors wrote in the journal PLOS Mental Health.

Lead author Max Chang said: “Adolescence is a crucial developmental stage during which people go through significant changes in their biology, cognition and personalities.

“As a result, the brain is particularly vulnerable to internet addictionrelated urges during this time, such as compulsive internet usage, cravings towards usage of the mouse or keyboard and consuming media.

“The findings from our study show that this can lead to potentially negative behavioural and developmental changes that could impact the lives of adolescents.

“For example, they may struggle to maintain relationships and social activities, lie about online activity and experience irregular eating and disrupted sleep.”

Senior author Irene Lee added: “There is no doubt that the internet has certain advantages. However, when it begins to affect our day-today lives, it is a problem.

“We would advise that young people enforce sensible time limits for their daily internet usage and ensure that they are aware of the psychological and social implications of spending too much time online.”

The authors point out that their study only looked at a small number of people, primarily from Asian countries and they called for more research with different populations.

But commenting on the paper, Professor David Ellis, from the University of Bath’s Institute for Digital Security and Behaviour, cautioned that “drawing strong conclusions from the papers reviewed (is) almost impossible” because of a number of limitations in the studies examined.

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