- Screen time

TIME FOR A SCREEN BREAK

FEELING THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF SPENDING TOO MUCH TIME ONLINE? SARA KEENAN FINDS OUT WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

West Lothian Courier · 24 Apr 2025 · 28



TECH plays a significant role in modern life and while it offers numerous benefits, many of us are spending increasing amounts of time on our digital devices.

Screen time has been on the rise over current years, yet too much time spent scrolling online can have a negative effect – from affecting social skills and disrupting sleep to developing 'tech neck.'

Data from consumer research platform GWI reveals that the average screen time in the UK is five hours and 34 minutes daily, and more than a quarter of Brits (27%) worry that they spend too much time on their smartphones.

Although not recognised through the NHS yet, Dr Catherine Carney, a psychiatrist and addiction expert from Delamere rehab clinic, says that tech addiction has become a more common issue over the years.

"There's a new term called digital sugar and it's when somebody is increasingly using technology and we see similar physiological phenomena that we see with substance addiction. It's giving people the same dopamine drive through social media," she says.

But what are the effects of high screen time and dependence on social media?

COGNITIVE ISSUES

"If you're sitting on your phone instead of being outside, in the gym, meeting with a friend, it can reduce access to socialisation and actually cause cognitive problems," says Dr Carney.

Research funded by the National Institutes of Health found that children who use screens for seven hours or more a day are showing signs that their brain cortex is thinning prematurely.
“It’s also been found that kids who spend a lot of time on their phones and then go into school find reading and writing harder than those kids who aren’t on the phones as much,” Dr Carney adds.

POSTURE CONCERNS

“Prolonged screen use often causes the head to shift forward, a condition commonly referred to as “tech neck”, says Faye Deane, Chiropractor and British Chiropractic Association member.
“This increases strain on the neck muscles and cervical spine, contributing to chronic pain, headaches, and even early degenerative changes. Sedentary lifestyles, remote work, and prolonged desk use also contribute to a hunched posture.
“Clinically, we see that excessive screen time leads to tight chest muscles and weakened upper back muscles, increasing the risk of musculoskeletal dysfunction. This postural imbalance can result in chronic discomfort and a higher likelihood of developing kyphotic (rounded upper back) postures over time.”

HEALTH ISSUES

“Spending too much time on screens is making us more sedentary, which can have a big impact on health,” says Dr Crystal Wyllie from ZAVA Online Doctor.
“Sitting for long periods increases the risk of weight gain, obesity, diabetes and heart disease. Hours of screen use can also cause eye strain, headaches and poor posture, leading to neck and back pain.”

EYE STRAIN

“The eyes can often become strained when focusing on screens for a long period of time,” says Giles Edmonds, Specsavers clinical services director.
“Digital eye strain is a very common condition that occurs from prolonged screen time. Spending too much time focusing on digital devices means your eyes may become fatigued, and sitting too close to screens can also strain eye muscles.
“Light glare reflected on digital screens can also make this worse, causing further eye strain.”

INCREASE IN ANXIETY

“Social media in general can create anxieties and extra pressures which make people feel like their lives seem inadequate and insignificant,” Dr Carney says.
“The same goes for when you’re seeking likes and comments on a photo – it can both boost your confidence but if you don’t get ‘enough’ it can have the opposite effect.”

LACK OF SOCIAL SKILLS

“There is an argument that people who are shy or socially awkward can often find social media easier to interact with people on,” Dr Carney says.
“However this can lead to them becoming dependent on it for connection and use it excessively. This is then mirrored with an ongoing reduction in social skills and withdrawing from the real world.
“It becomes a catch-22 because you’re using social media for your self-esteem and confidence but it’s actually reducing all the skills you previously had.”

DISRUPTED SLEEP PATTERN

“Mentally, screens, especially at night, mess with sleep by disrupting melatonin production,” says Dr Wyllie. “Poor sleep is also linked closely to stronger cravings for sugary or highcarb foods as the body looks for a quick energy boost.”

“If you’re going to bed at 11 and endlessly scrolling through social media for hours, your sleep may be affected and this carries into the next

Social media in general can create anxieties and extra pressures which make people feel like their lives seem inadequate and insignificant Psychiatrist Dr Catherine Carney

day when concentration levels aren’t going to be as good,” Dr Carney says.

HOW TO MANAGE YOUR SCREEN TIME Recognise the problem

“The best way to reduce screen time is to start small,” says Dr Wyllie.

“You need to be honest with yourself and recognise if your screen time is becoming an issue. Identify what your triggers are, what you spend the most time focused on and then plan accordingly,” says Dr Carney.

Find an alternative

“Rather than thinking of spending six hours on your phone, try find a new hobby or an alternative way to spend that time,” Dr Carney says.

“You could join a gym, start horse riding, take up knitting or go out with a friend. You need to find something to fill that time.”

Set time limits

“You can use the 20-20-20 rule,” says Dr Deepali Misra-Sharp.

“This means every 20 minutes, look 20 feet away for 20 seconds.”

“You can also establish screenfree zones such as the bedroom or meal times.”

“Setting time limits is a great way to manage your screen time and if you struggle to do that independently, there are new communities getting established,” Dr Carney says.

“For example, there’s a new group called Internet and Technology Addicts Anonymous.

“It’s an anonymous forum for people who are addicted to their phones and they can get peer support as they try to maximise their time online.”