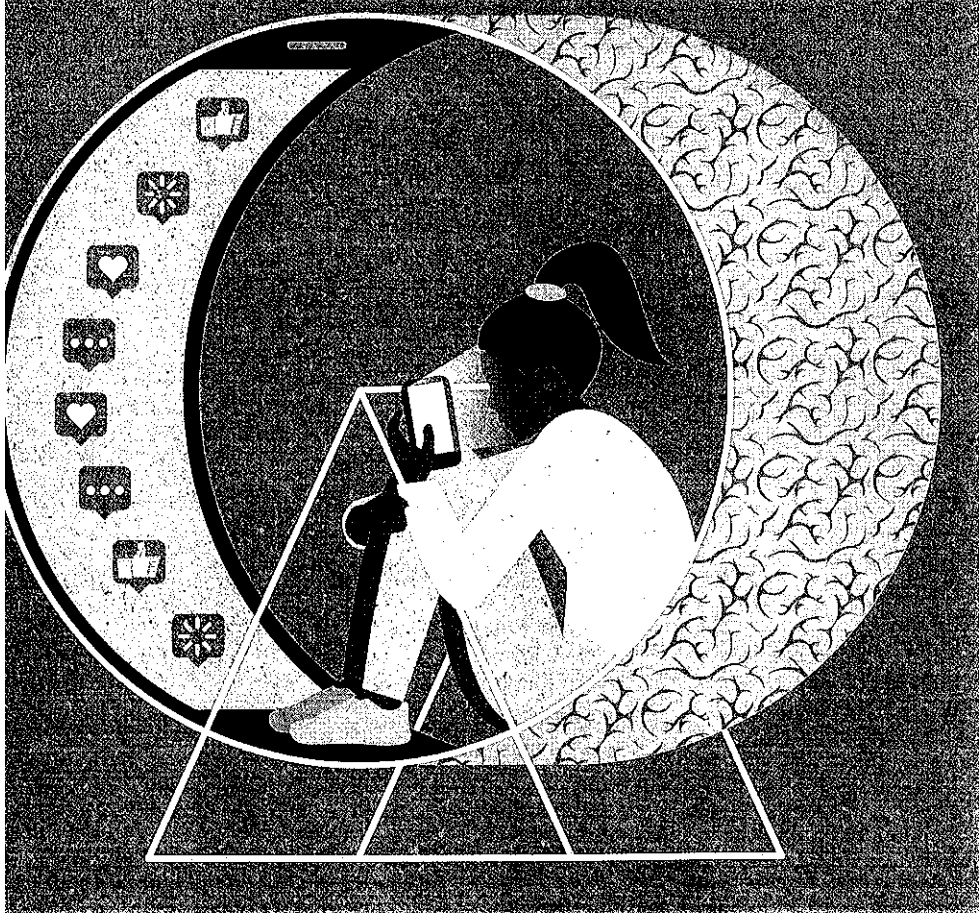


Can Too Much Screen Time Harm You?

Phones, tablets, even watches – screens are everywhere you turn. According to a survey from *Common Sense Media*, teens spend an average of seven hours and 22 minutes on screens every day – not counting computer time for schoolwork!

And yet studies show that excessive screen time can affect you in many ways. Teens may be especially at risk, since adolescence is a key time in the development of the brain. So if you enjoy watching funny videos or texting with your best friend, it's important to create habits that will give you a break from screen time. Here's why – and how.

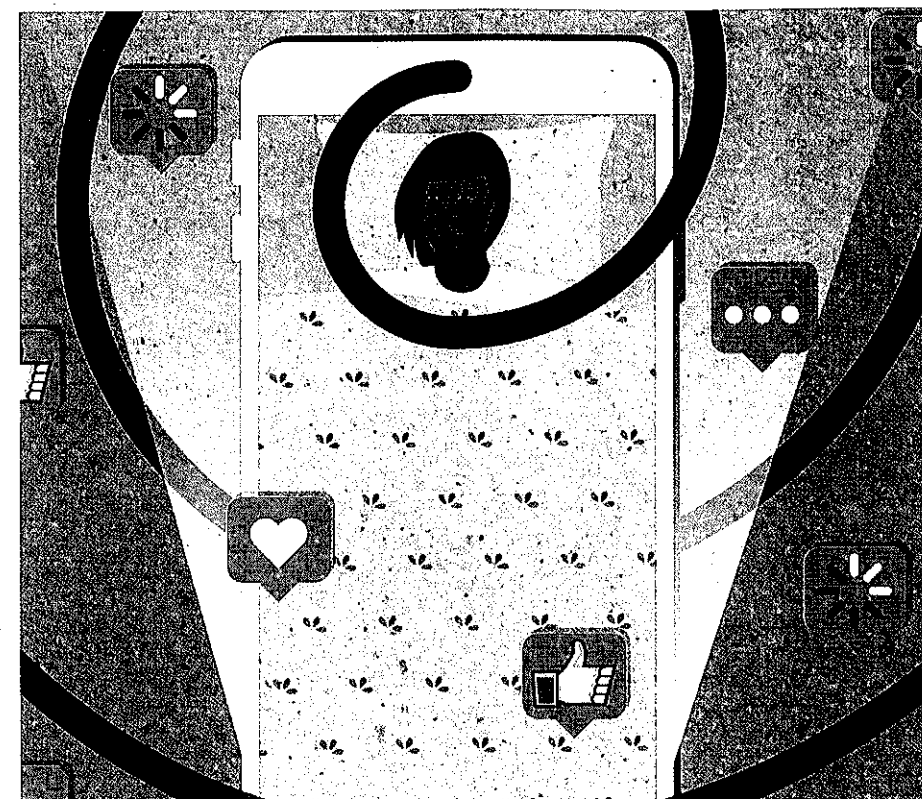


BEFORE YOU READ:

- How many devices with screens do you have?
- How long do you spend on a screen every day?
- During the Covid-19 lockdown, did you spend more time in front of a screen? What were you doing?

Screens and Sleep

Too much screen time can disrupt* your sleep. You may stay up later because you're occupied by your device. The light from screens can also reduce the amount of melatonin your body produces. This chemical helps your body fall asleep, and stay asleep. Normally, your body releases melatonin at night in response to darkness. Lights reduce melatonin production, keeping you awake. Sleep is especially important for teens. Getting too little of it can weaken your immune system*, making you more likely to get sick. Lack of sleep can also affect your ability to learn. You probably know that it's hard to concentrate* if you didn't get enough sleep the night before. But it can also affect your memory. Sleep is the time when your brain stores what it's learned during the day – making it possible for you to remember the information in those tests.



Screens and Mood*

There is some evidence that too much scrolling* and texting can also affect your emotional health. Some studies suggest a link between higher levels of screen time and an increase in symptoms of depression. Many other factors also play a role in depression, and scientists are still studying the relationship between screen time and mood.

Other studies show that some kids who spend long periods of time on screens experience changes in their mood and behaviour: they might neglect* responsibilities, use screens to deal with stress, and feel anxious when cut off from their devices.

Screens and the Brain

Too many hours on your phone may even cause physical changes to your brain. The cortex – the part of the brain that processes* information – develops during teenage years, and research

shows that screen time may affect its growth. In *The Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) Study*, scientists discovered that some kids who use screens more than seven hours a day had a thinner cortex than those who use screens less. More studies are necessary to learn how this will affect kids' brains over time.

Screens and Skills

What scientists already know for sure is that everything you experience as a teen can affect your brain development. During your teens, the brain is changing rapidly. It's important to challenge your brain in different ways, so that it can help you process information and solve problems in the future. That's why taking time away from screens is helpful. The more you try new things, like sports, music and cooking, the more skilled your brain will become. Screens may always be a part of your life – but they don't have to be the main part.

WORDWISE * to disrupt (v): to stop someone doing something or stop something happening
 * immune system (n): the body's defence against infection * to concentrate (v): to think clearly, to have your full attention on something
 * mood (n): how you feel, emotional state * to scroll (v): to move a digital screen with your finger or mouse
 * to neglect (v): to not pay attention, to forget to do something * to process (v): to understand
 * boost (n): to help something increase or improve

TIPS TO TURN OFF

- 1 **CHECK IT OUT.** Use an app to track your screen time. Surprised? Set a daily limit.
- 2 **SWITCH OFF YOUR SCREENS.** Try to turn off and check out of social media 30-60 minutes before you go to bed.
- 3 **TAKE UP A DIFFERENT ACTIVITY.** Go to the park, ride your bike, bake a cake – just schedule something different that's not on screen.
- 4 **WORK OUT.** Exercise will give you a natural energy boost.
- 5 **WRITE IT UP.** Make a note of how your screen time makes you feel. If you are worried, then open up to a friend, teacher or parent.

Project: Digital Diary

Keep a diary of your screen time for 24 hours. If you have a screen-time app on your phone, use it to track time. Don't forget to also add up:

- Social media
- Watching TV
- Gaming
- And on-screen study.

Share your results with your classmates. How do you feel?

