

# OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Steven L. Smith, DC

## Is Screen Time a Hazard to Your Health?

*Television, video games and Internet browsing are how many adults and children pass their free time. But what does screen time do for our health? Plenty, and it's not good, according to the research.*

*Dr. Smith is concerned about the risks associated with screen time and encourages adults and children alike to limit TV, video games and computer use for their well-being. Read on to learn more about the latest research on the hazards of excessive screen time.*



(*Public Health Nutr* 2011;14:1563-9).

### Shortens Life Expectancy

One hot-off-the-presses study concludes that people who watch an average of six hours of TV daily have a life expectancy of nearly five years less than those who watch no TV. This may seem like an extreme example, but consider another shocking statistic: On average, for adults over age 25, each hour of television time takes 21.8 minutes off life expectancy (*Br J Sports Med* 2011;Epub).

Research also associates screen time with higher mortality from all causes (*Circulation* 2010;121:384-91).

### Unhealthy Eating Habits

The idea that watching too much TV makes you fat and unhealthy — the classic “coach potato” image — is well-grounded in science. In a recent

investigation of 11,658 children aged 5-19, researchers collected information on height, weight and time spent watching television after school.

They found that for every 30 minutes of average daily viewing, a child is 21 percent more likely to be obese (*Int J Behav Nutr Phys Act* 2011;8:66).

In addition to physical inactivity, food advertisements often get the blame for childhood obesity. Fast food commercials are twice as common and candy commercials three times as common during children’s programs compared with adult programs (*Health Promot Int* 2005;20:105-12).

Other investigations find that ads for unhealthy foods are rampant during children’s television shows around the world (*Am J Public Health* 2010;100:1730-6).

Do these commercials make a difference in how kids eat? Research suggests that they do indeed, says Dr. Smith. A study of fifth and sixth grade students revealed that those who watch more television have more positive attitudes toward junk food (*Soc Sci Med* 2007;65:1311-23).

And, teenagers surveyed reported more consumption of sugar-laden beverages and foods, if they watched more than two hours of TV daily

Commercials are not the only reason screen time is associated with poor eating habits, explains Dr. Smith. Distractions while eating seem to dull the sensory experience of eating, resulting in less satisfaction and more likelihood of overeating later to compensate.

College students who ate lunch while watching television were less able to recall what they ate and consumed more snack food later compared with students who ate identical lunches without the TV on (*Appetite* 2009;52:39-43).

Another investigation found similar results when participants played a computer game while eating (*Am J Clin Nutr* 2011;93:308-13).

### Cardiovascular Health and Diabetes

The obesity linked with excessive screen time brings myriad health risks. A paper appearing recently in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* connects watching over two hours of TV daily to increased risk of type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease, blaming both unhealthy food choices and replacement of physical activity with television (*JAMA* 2011;305:2448-55).



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According to an earlier study, every two hours of daily TV viewing increases obesity risk by 23 percent and diabetes risk by 14 percent (*JAMA* 2003;289:1785-91)

Cardiovascular risk even shows up in preteens when it comes to screen time. An investigation of seventh graders in Australia earlier this year found significant increases in blood pressure for every hour spent in front of the TV or computer (*J Hum Hypertens* 2011;Epub).

### Youth Behavior

If you have children, you're probably concerned about how inappropriate content on television affects their choices and behavior. Scientists concerned with this question have found that parents do indeed have reason to be concerned.

For example, a review of the 50 most-watched sports broadcasts shown before 9:00 p.m. examined the content of commercials. Of 1,185 individual commercials shown, 14 percent depicted unsafe behavior and 6 percent depicted violence. At least one questionable commercial aired during almost half of all commercial breaks (*Pediatrics* 2004;114:e694-8).

Another study looked at portrayal of tobacco use in top-rated American TV shows for ages 12-17. Forty percent of episodes of these shows included at least one depiction of tobacco use (*Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med* 2011;165:147-51).

This is concerning because teenagers who are exposed to smoking in the media are more likely to smoke, especially if there is minimal parental control of what they view.

Other high-risk behaviors — such as illegal drug use, alcohol consumption and non-use of seat belts — are more common in youth who spend the most time watching TV or at the computer (*Prey Med* 2011;52:99-103).

Another concern for many parents is the effect of violence in the media on



their children. A study of 860 adolescents in Turkey compared reported TV viewing habits and scores on an assessment measuring child behavior patterns. Researchers found a significant relation between television viewing hours and aggressive behavior (*Indian Pediatr* 2011;48:229-31).

Another study conducted in Canada connected heavy video game and computer use with increased incidences of violence in teens as measured by physical bullying and fights (*Int J Public Health* 2010;Epub).

Trials measuring brain activity during exposure to media violence confirm the notion of desensitization. Parts of the brain that respond emotionally to witnessing violence react less strongly after repeated exposure to videos depicting aggressive action (*Soc Cogn Affect Neurosci* 2010;Epub).

Adolescents with diagnosed aggression problems are also more likely to have their behavior influenced by media violence (*Psychiatry Res* 2011;192:12-9).

### Screen Time and Sleep

A final way screen time can harm well-being is its effect on sleep for adults and kids alike. The doctor

warns patients that exposure to the bright light radiating from a TV or computer screen close to bedtime inhibits the body's melatonin production, making it more difficult to fall asleep.

Getting engrossed in a TV show, video game or Internet chat often delays bedtime and stimulates the brain, further delaying sleep (*Adolesc Med State Art Rev* 2010;21:418-29, *Sleep Med* 2010;11:735-42).

Both evening and daytime screen time can adversely affect nighttime sleep for children. An analysis of 3- to 5-year-olds shows that sleep problems were more likely with exposure to violent content during the day and any screen time after 7:00 p.m. (*Pediatrics* 2011;128:29-35).

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