

# Anticipatory Guidance: Media and Physical Health

These past few years have seen both an increase in the amount of time adolescents spend with screen media and the prevalence of childhood and adolescent obesity. While time with screen media may not be the primary contributor to the current obesity epidemic, research shows that increased screen time can affect children's food and activity choices and plays a role in their overall physical health.

## What the Evidence Says

- Food marketers are interested in youth as consumers “with spending power, purchasing influence, and as future adult consumers they are a valuable target for the food and beverage industries.”<sup>1</sup> Studies have shown that well over 50% of advertisements accompanying youth TV shows are about foods, and up to 98% of these promote foods that are high in fat, sugar and/or sodium.<sup>2</sup>
- Mindless eating while using screen media can contribute to adolescents not paying attention to natural hunger and satiety cues, which can result in more calories consumed overall, leading to weight gain.<sup>3</sup>
- Sedentary behavior such as screen media use can result in adolescents experiencing a lower health-related quality of life.<sup>4</sup>
- Misinformation about teen health is rampant online, and online communities exist that promote anorexia and bulimia as a lifestyle, leading to adolescents engaging in unhealthy disordered eating.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, exposure to images of an “ideal” body type in entertainment media and social media can result in adolescents experiencing low self-esteem, body image issues, and disordered eating habits.<sup>6</sup> Adolescents may also engage in editing their own photos in an attempt to fit in with society's expectations.<sup>7</sup>

## Recommendations

- Educate parents about the significant effect advertisements have on adolescents, and advise to use a DVR to skip ads, or an online streaming service that does not have ads.
- Recommend that all meals be eaten away from a screen, whether it is a TV, tablet, or mobile phone, emphasizing the other benefits of family meal times—increased connectedness and communication.
- Recommend active video games that involve movement, or dancing or working out to their favorite music videos.
- Excessive media use can substantially affect adolescents' nutrition and activity levels, and changing media use habits has the potential to improve their weight if they are overweight or obese. Changing behavior is not easy, so try one change at a time and arrange a follow-up visit in 1-2 months to see how things are going. It will require commitment from both the family and provider.

## Future Directions

As the body of research grows, there is more and more evidence showing that increased screen time and exposure to advertisements have a huge, deleterious effect on the diet and lifestyle of adolescents, which will likely follow them into adulthood. We need to consider advocating for industry commitment to children's health and for the removal of food related advertisements during children's programming. We need to continue to add to the larger movement for a healthier generation of children and promote things such as family meal time and mindful eating.

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## Suggested Reading

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