



Center on Media
and Child Health

Internet Guide for Teens

Tips to help you with life online



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YOUR LIFE ONLINE

Video games. Social media. TV. Videos. Music. Apps. We live in a media and technology-saturated society, and sometimes it can be hard to know how it is affecting our lives.

Media affect all of us in ways that are important to understand for health and development. This booklet will help you make sense of how media can positively and negatively affect how you think, act, learn, and grow. Use the information here as a guide to help you use media in thoughtful and healthy ways.



MENTAL HEALTH & MEDIA

How you feel about yourself and how the media you use affect those feelings is important to your mental health and well-being.

What do I need to know about media and mental health?

- Comparing yourself to perfected, filtered, and/or happy images of others on social media can cause you to feel badly about your current situation, especially if you are stressed or already feeling sad.
- Fear of missing out (FOMO) can cause you to feel pressure to keep up with the latest online trends, or to post updates on social media that portray an image that may not reflect who you really are and how you are feeling.
- When media use becomes problematic, you may find yourself withdrawing from friends, family, and the activities you love in order to spend more time with media. These behaviors can negatively affect your mental health and strain your relationships, physical health, and school performance.
- When media are used in healthful ways, such as keeping connected with loved ones, displaying creativity and learning new things, they can positively influence your mental health.

What can I do?

- Be mindful of comparing yourself to others online and remember that people often portray only their best selves, and that their images and posts may not reflect how they actually feel.
- Avoid feeling pressure to share on social media, and only use them when and how you want to, so that they support how you feel in positive ways.
- Use media that positively influence your life and support healthy relationships, your creativity, and who you are and want to become.
- If you think your media use is becoming a problem, talk to a parent/guardian, trusted adult, or your health care provider about your concerns, and ask for help about ways to cut back on your media use.

PHYSICAL HEALTH & MEDIA

The activities you choose to do, and the foods you eat are important to your physical health and well-being.

What do I need to know about media and physical health?

- Advertising can influence what foods, drinks, and snacks you want, and these ads often promote products that are full of sugar, salt, and fat.
- When you eat while watching TV or movies, you may eat more than your body needs because you are distracted, and not paying attention to when your body feels full.
- Your body uses very little energy when playing video games, watching videos, or browsing social media, which can lead to weight gain and obesity.
- You can find a lot of information online about your body, but not all of it is healthy or correct. Pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia websites and “thinspiration” social media accounts can be harmful to engage with as they warp your sense of beauty and encourage unhealthy behaviors.

What can I do?

- Avoid watching commercials when possible. Use ad-free video streaming services, watch recorded videos, or fast forward through commercials.
- Make eating meals and snacks screen-free by turning off devices.
- Make time for 60 minutes of physical activity each day, whether it be playing a sport, going to the gym, or walking.
- Use media to get your body moving, like dancing to upbeat music, or playing a video game that gets you on your feet.
- Remember that many of the photos you see online have been edited to portray an unrealistic body type. Keep a positive attitude about your own body image, and try only to engage with content that supports a healthy lifestyle.

SEX & MEDIA

Understanding how media portray sex is important for developing healthy behaviors related to sex.

What do I need to know about media and sex?

- Unsafe and risky sex is often glamorized in media, making it seem like these practices are normal and free of consequences (even though they aren't!).
- You may be pressured to “sext” (send sexually explicit photos or messages) via text or other messaging apps.
- You may also feel pressure to share sexy images of yourself on social media, especially if your friends and celebrities you follow are posting similar content.
- Media, such as movies, TV shows, music, video games, and pornography can lead you to have unrealistic expectations when it comes to sex, gender roles, bodies (their own body and their partner’s body), and romantic relationships.

What can I do?

- Ask your doctor or school nurse for pamphlets about puberty, sex, sexual orientation, pregnancy, sexually infected transmissions (STIs), contraception, and sexual assault.
- The Center for Young Women’s Health/Men’s Health at Boston Children’s Hospital has a range of reliable information about sex and your body. Visit them online at www.youngwomenshealth.org and www.youngmenshealthsite.org
- Think critically about media portrayals of sexuality and sex. This way, you will be better able to recognize when information is untrue or unrealistic and only showing a certain point of view.
- Try not to feel pressured to send or post sexual or provocative photos of yourself. Any photo you share is available for anyone to see—even if an app guarantees privacy. Talk to a trusted adult if you are feeling pressured.

SLEEP & MEDIA

How much sleep and the quality of the sleep you get each night are important for both your physical and mental health.

What do I need to know about media and sleep?

- The “blue light” from screens can disrupt your circadian rhythm, which is the body’s internal clock that regulates when you feel sleepy and awake.
- When you sleep near your smartphone or other screen media, notifications from these devices can disrupt your sleep, waking you in the middle of the night.
- Not getting enough sleep can lead to mental health problems such as difficulties learning, paying attention, and managing moods.
- Not getting enough sleep can also contribute to issues with your physical health, such as unhealthy eating, weight gain, and becoming sick.

What can I do?

- Create a bedtime routine that includes stopping the use of screen media at least one hour before bed.
- Charge phones, laptops, and tablets overnight somewhere other than your bedroom.
- If you use your phone as an alarm to wake you up in the morning, ask your parent for a regular alarm clock to use.
- If you notice that you are feeling more moody, doing poorly in school, or getting sick more often, pay attention to how much sleep you are getting every night. You may need to adjust your schedule and media use so that you are able to spend more time sleeping.

SOCIAL SKILLS & RELATIONSHIPS & MEDIA

How you interact with friends, family, and others is important for your social development and mental health.

What do I need to know about media, social skills, and relationships?

- Violent media can encourage aggression, make you less sensitive to seeing and hearing about violent acts, and make you less likely to speak up or seek help when they happen in the real world.
- Relying too heavily on technology for social interactions may result in missing out on face-to-face communication and opportunities to build meaningful relationships with friends and family
- Oversharing on social media may cause you to experience regret if you feel you've shared too much, or gave others the wrong impression.
- Cyberbullying, whether you are the victim or the bully, can have serious effects on your social life, school performance and well-being, including relationship problems, trouble sleeping, depression, and less school success.

What can I do?

- If you are a victim of cyberbullying, take a screenshot of the messages or pictures, and tell a trusted adult what happened. In extreme cases, it may be necessary for you to report a cyberbullying situation to school officials and/or the police. Try not to give into peer pressure if your friends are cyberbullying others.
- Choose media that show positive ways of solving problems and have messages about listening, expressing feelings, working together, and being kind.
- Maintain your relationships with friends and family by getting together with them in person as much as possible and keeping in touch through social media, texting, or gaming.

SUBSTANCE USE & MEDIA

It is important to be aware of how media can influence your attitudes and behaviors when it comes to drinking, doing drugs, smoking and, vaping.

What do I need to know about media and substance use?

- Alcohol, smoking, and drugs are often glamorized in the media, which can make it seem like substance use is common (and even normal).
- Movies and TV shows usually do not show the consequences of substance use, making it seem like these activities are risk-free.
- Alcohol, tobacco, and vape advertisers can make their products look cool and fun, especially when ads use celebrities and attractive models to promote their product.
- Teens who are exposed to media showing substance use are more likely to use drugs, alcohol, or tobacco themselves.

What can I do?

- When you come across substance use in TV, movies, online videos, music, or video games, remember that there are serious negative physical, social, and legal consequences to smoking, vaping, drinking, and using drugs.
- Think critically about media portrayals of substance use. This way, you will be better able to recognize when information is untrue or unrealistic.
- If you have any questions about drugs, alcohol, or smoking, or are worried that you may have a problem, talk to a trusted adult for help and support. This can include your parents, a teacher, a school counselor, or your health care provider.

TIME MANAGEMENT & MEDIA

How you think about and understand your time is important to developing healthy routines and time management skills, now and into the future.

What do I need to know about media and time management?

- Media can be a healthy part of your life when balanced with other activities, like sleep, family mealtime, hanging out with friends, being outside, exercising, reading, and doing homework.
- Multitasking with media, such as texting while doing your homework, can take away from your ability to focus and complete your work as well as you would be able to without distractions.
- Excessive, heavy, or constant media use can cause problems with weight gain, sleep, anger management, and school performance. Some of these problems can last into adulthood if not addressed.

What can I do?

- Create a Family Media Plan, which can help you find a balance between your offline and online activities:
www.healthychildren.org/english/media
- Challenge your friends to turn off their mobile devices, or keep them in your bag or pocket when spending time together.
- Turn off all screen media devices, such as smartphones and gaming consoles, beginning an hour before bedtime and keep them off during the night.
- Make sure that your daily activity plan allows you enough time to get the sleep you need, about 8 to 9 hours each night.
- If you think you are using media too much, talk to a parent/guardian, trusted adult, or your health care provider about your concerns, and ask for help about ways to cut back on your media use.



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