Study: Frequent social media use disrupts sleep, physical activity in teen girls
by Melissa Jenco, News Content Editor

Cyberbullying and lack of sleep and physical activity may be to blame for the ties between social media use and poor mental health and well-being in teen girls, researchers found.

They studied nearly 10,000 adolescents in England over three years starting in 2013 when participants were 13 or 14 years old. The teens were asked about frequency of social media use, their psychological health, cyberbullying, sleep, physical activity and well-being.

By the third year, 69% of boys and 75% of girls were very frequent social media users, defined as multiple times per day, according to the study published Tuesday in The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health.

About 28% of girls who used social media very frequently reported psychological distress compared to 20% of those using it weekly or less. The most frequent users also had lower life satisfaction and happiness and greater anxiety. Researchers found that cyberbullying and reduced sleep and physical activity play a significant role in explaining these findings.

"Our results suggest that social media itself doesn't cause harm, but that frequent use may disrupt activities that have a positive impact on mental health such as sleeping and exercising, while increasing exposure of young people to harmful content, particularly the negative experience of cyber-bullying," lead author Russell Viner, Ph.D., M.B.B.S., M.Phil., said in a news release.

Among teen boys, about 15% of very frequent social media users reported psychological distress compared to 10% of the least frequent users. Cyberbullying, sleep and physical activity played a significantly smaller role than for girls. There were no significant links between boys’ very frequent social media use and their life satisfaction, happiness or anxiety.

"The clear sex differences we discovered could simply be attributed to girls accessing social media more frequently than boys, or to the fact that girls had higher levels of anxiety to begin with," co-author Dasha Nicholls, M.D., said in a news release. "Cyberbullying may be more prevalent among girls, or it may be more closely associated with stress in girls than in boys."

Authors said additional study would be needed to determine why social media is linked to psychological distress in boys but said the causes likely are indirect as they are for girls. They also stressed the importance of ensuring teens get enough sleep and physical activity.

In a related commentary, Ann DeSmet, Ph.D., echoed that sentiment, saying "if the displacement of healthy lifestyles and cyberbullying can be attenuated, the positive effects of social media use, such as encouraging social interactions, can be endorsed." She also called for multifaceted school programs to promote mental health.

"This Article shows that sleep, cyberbullying, and physical activity are important lifestyle mediators to target in protecting and improving youth mental health," she wrote.
• AAP policy “Media Use in School-Aged Children and Adolescents”
• Information for parents from HealthyChildren.org on creating a Family Media Plan