

Teens' social media use does not raise risk for depression: study

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Contrary to popular wisdom, daily social media use is not a strong or consistent risk factor for depressive symptoms among adolescents, according to a new study by Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health researchers. The results are published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

"Increasingly, teenagers are active on social media, particularly during the pandemic, as they have to rely on Instagram, TikTok, and other platforms to stay in touch with friends," says first author Noah Kreski, MPH, who conducted the research as a practicum project as a Columbia Mailman School student and currently works as a data analyst in the Department of Epidemiology. "While some adults have voiced concerns over the potential mental health risks of this behavior, our research finds no compelling evidence to suggest that social media use meaningfully increases adolescents' risk of [depressive symptoms](#)."

The researchers analyzed [survey data](#) collected by Monitoring the Future, an ongoing study of the behaviors, attitudes, and values of Americans from

adolescence through adulthood, representing 74,472 8th and 10th grade students between 2009 to 2017. They assessed depressive symptoms to establish underlying depression risk, which they controlled for in their analysis to understand how daily social media use might contribute to depression.

Daily social media use among 8th and 10th grade students increased from 61 percent to 89 percent among girls, and from 46 percent to 75 percent among boys, from 2009 to 2017. Daily social media use was not associated with depressive symptoms after accounting for the fact that the adolescents who frequently use social media have worse mental health to begin with. However, among girls who had the lowest risk for depressive symptoms, daily social media use was weakly associated with symptoms, though due to low risk, the overall prevalence of symptoms in that group was small. Among boys, daily social media use was not linked to increased depressive symptoms, and some evidence suggested that daily social media use may actually be protective against depression.

"Daily [social media use](#) does not capture the diverse ways in which adolescents use social media, which may be both positive and negative depending on the [social context](#)," says senior author Katherine Keyes, Ph.D., associate professor of epidemiology at Columbia Mailman School. "Future research could explore the specific behaviors and experiences of young people using social media, as well as more frequent engagement with the various platforms."

Background on Adolescent Depression and Social Media Use

After almost 50 years of stability, recent evidence has indicated unprecedented increases in [adolescent](#) depression, depressive symptoms, and suicidal behavior, particularly among girls. There has been widespread speculation that increasing

use of smartphones and social media has contributed to these trends. Proponents of this hypothesis note that adolescents are increasingly isolated from face-to-face interaction, experience cyber-bullying, and face challenges to self-esteem and self-worth through curated online images of peers. On the other hand, social [media](#) is often a positive outlet, and its use may have positive effects on adolescent self-esteem. Social networking sites provide a space for content that is positive or humorous, particularly valuable to adolescents who are depressed. Many young people seek out support and advice on [social media](#), particularly those with moderate to severe depressive symptoms.

More information: Noah Kreski et al, Social Media Use and Depressive Symptoms Among United States Adolescents, *Journal of Adolescent Health* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.07.006](#)

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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