

COVID-19 pandemic led to increased screen time, more sleep problems

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A new study in the journal *Sleep* finds that increased evening screen time during the COVID-19 lockdown negatively affects sleep quality.

During the lockdown period in Italy, daily internet traffic volume almost doubled compared to the same [time](#) in the previous year. Researchers here conducted a web-based survey of 2,123 Italian residents during the third and seventh week of Italy's first national lockdown. The survey ran in the third week of lockdown (March 25th—28th, 2020) and evaluated sleep quality and insomnia symptoms, using the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index and the Insomnia Severity Index as means of measurement. The second assessment survey, in the seventh week of lockdown (April 21st—27th, 2020), inquired about usage of electronic devices in the two hours before falling asleep, in addition to repeating the sleep questionnaires.

Of the participants surveyed, 92.9% reported an increase in their electronic device usage between the first and second surveys. These participants showed decreased sleep quality, an increase in insomnia symptoms, shorter total sleep times, and later bedtimes and rising times. Researchers found an increased prevalence of poor sleepers and respondents with moderate to severe insomnia symptoms only within this group of respondents.

Some 7.1% of participants reported a decrease in evening screen time between the first and second survey, and conversely reported improved sleep quality and fewer symptoms of insomnia. This subgroup also demonstrated a decrease in the prevalence of poor sleepers and moderate/severe [insomnia](#) symptoms. These respondents went to bed consistently earlier after four weeks of home confinement.

Survey respondents who reported no change in their screen time exposure likewise showed no variations in their sleep habits. Notably, this group of responders had the best sleep quality and fewest [insomnia symptoms](#) in the first survey results, suggesting that the lockdown exacerbated negative sleep conditions for people already suffering from poor [sleep quality](#).

Dr. Federico Salfi, Ph.D. student and first author of the paper, says "The overuse of electronic devices in the hours before sleep was a deeply rooted habit in our society already before the pandemic emergency, in particular among young people. In our opinion, the current period of social distancing added fuel to the fire."

Prof. Michele Ferrara, Director of the Laboratory of Sleep Psychophysiology and Cognitive Neuroscience at the University of L'Aquila, says "The evidence of a strong relationship between screen habits and the time course of sleep disturbances during the [lockdown](#) period suggests that, now, more than never, raising public awareness about the risks of evening exposure to electronic devices could be crucial to preserve general sleep health. This applies to both the ongoing pandemic and the future, as electronic technologies will find more and more space in our daily routine."

More information: Federico Salfi et al, Changes of evening exposure to electronic devices during the COVID-19 lockdown affect the time course of sleep disturbances, *Sleep* (2021). [DOI: 10.1093/sleep/zsab080](https://doi.org/10.1093/sleep/zsab080)

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