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Surgeon general advisory warns of social media’s effects on youth mental health

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Social media carries a “profound risk of harm” to youths, potentially impacting their mental health at a vulnerable stage of life, according to a [new advisory](#) from the U.S. surgeon general.

U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy, M.D., M.B.A., called on policymakers, researchers, tech companies, parents and adolescents to make social media safer and pointed them to the AAP’s new [Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#) for guidance.

“We must acknowledge the growing body of research about potential harms, increase our collective understanding of the risks associated with social media use, and urgently take action to create safe and healthy digital environments that minimize harm and safeguard children’s and adolescents’ mental health and well-being during critical stages of development,” Dr. Murthy wrote.

About 95% of teens and 40% of children ages 8-12 years use social media, according to the advisory. Studies have found about one-third of teens use it “almost constantly,” and the average daily usage for eighth and 10th graders is about 3.5 hours.

“Today’s children and teens do not know a world without digital technology, but the digital world wasn’t built with children’s healthy mental development in mind,” AAP President Sandy L. Chung, M.D., FAAP, said in a [press release](#). “We need an approach to help children both on and offline that meets each child where they are while also working to make the digital spaces they inhabit safer and healthier.”

Dr. Murthy said social media has some benefits. Youths can find a space for self-expression and connect with their peers. However, he also said youths are at a vulnerable time in their lives when their brains are developing, emotions are heightened and risk-taking behaviors are peaking. They are developing their identities, experiencing peer pressure and may be struggling with their mental health.

Studies have found social media use is linked with symptoms of anxiety and depression at a time when there already is a youth mental health crisis, which Dr. Murthy laid out in [a 2021 advisory](#) and the [AAP has been calling on health officials](#) to address. In addition, users may experience cyberbullying, and nearly half of teens said the platforms make them feel worse about their bodies.

About 64% of adolescents said they often or sometimes are exposed to hate-based content, according to the advisory. Social media also may expose youths to depictions of self-harm that normalize such behavior.

In addition, youths on social media may be targeted by predatory adults looking to exploit them. Nearly 60% of adolescent girls said a stranger contacted them on social media, making them feel uncomfortable.

Social media algorithms are designed to keep users engaged for hours, impacting their sleep and attention. The surgeon general's advisory cited some small studies that compared the impact on the brain to substance use or gambling addiction.

“Nearly every teenager in America uses social media, and yet we do not have enough evidence to conclude that it is sufficiently safe for them,” Dr. Murthy wrote. “Our children have become unknowing participants in a decades-long experiment.”

He said more research is needed on the impact of social media and best practices. He also laid out recommendations for policymakers, technology companies, parents/caregivers, children and adolescents.

Dr. Murthy recommended parents and caregivers [create a family media plan using HealthyChildren.org resources](#), model appropriate use of social media and follow the guidance outlined in the AAP policy [Media and Young Minds](#). They should report cyberbullying and exploitation and teach their children about responsible use of technology with the help of the AAP's new [Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#).

The national center says it “will serve as a centralized, trusted source for evidence-based education and technical assistance to support the mental health of children and adolescents as they navigate social media.” It is partnering with families, experts and communities to promote best practices for media use and mitigate the harmful impacts of social media on mental health. The center recently launched a [Q&A portal](#) with age-based resources.

Children and adolescents also can help protect themselves, according to the surgeon general. They should reach out for help if they are being impacted negatively by social media, create boundaries to balance online and offline activities, develop protective strategies and be cautious about what they share. They should not take part in harassment or abuse and should report these behaviors.

Dr. Murthy also called on policymakers to strengthen protections for youths, support future research and ensure tech companies share data. Tech companies should conduct independent assessments of their impact, prioritize user health and safety in their site design and respond quickly to reports of harm.

“At a moment when we are experiencing a national youth mental health crisis, now is the time to act swiftly and decisively to protect children and adolescents from risk of harm,” he wrote.

Resources

- [U.S. surgeon general's advisory *Social Media and Youth Mental Health*](#)
- [AAP Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#)
- [AAP social media and youth mental health Q&A portal](#)
- [AAP policy *Media Use in School-Aged Children and Adolescents*](#)
- [AAP policy *Media and Young Minds*](#)
- [Information for parents from HealthyChildren.org on social media and mental health](#)
- [Information for parents from HealthyChildren.org on creating a Family Media Plan](#)