

ADDICTION

Are You Addicted to Technology?

By Jennifer Acosta Scott | Reviewed by Pat F. Bass, III, MD, MPH

There's a difference between being online a lot and being online for an unhealthy amount of time. Find out if you might be a technology addict, and learn steps to get better.

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Anyone can become a tech addict, but some health conditions like depression can increase your risk. Hugh Whitaker/Getty Images

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Technology addiction can take many forms, from social media overuse to excessive **online gaming**.
- To help **overcome the addiction**, plan for "no technology days" or try apps that track the time spent on tech devices.

When you hear the word "addiction," you're likely to think of the usual suspects: drugs, alcohol, tobacco, gambling. But in recent years, health experts have begun to call attention to a newer, stealthier **source of addiction**: technology.

The latest figures from the **U.S. Census Bureau** show that nearly 75 percent of all American households now have Internet access. And 58 percent of adults in the United States have a smartphone, according to the **Pew Research Center**. It's not surprising, then, that more people are developing what could be considered unhealthy behaviors related to computers and mobile devices, says **Lisa Strohman, PhD**, a psychologist and founder of the Technology Wellness Center in

Scottsdale, Ariz.

"It's just gotten so much worse in terms of how much technology is impacting my clients," Strohman says. "You see kids out at dinner with iPads. It's ubiquitous. It's everywhere."

Types of Technology Addictions

Technology addiction is not yet listed in the latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, so there are no formal classifications of it as a disorder. But **David Greenfield, PhD**, a psychologist and founder of the Center for Internet and Technology Addiction in Hartford, Conn., says that technology addiction typically takes one of the following forms:

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- **Internet addiction.** This is an over-dependence on Internet-connected devices. People may spend hours browsing online shopping sites, playing online games like Candy Crush, or accessing the Internet in some other way.
- **Sexual content addiction.** People who have this form of technology addiction are obsessed with consuming sexually-oriented content on the Internet.
- **Social media addiction.** Social media addicts can't stop using sites like Facebook and Twitter — even though they may want to. "Their work performance or academic performance may suffer because they're so distracted, tracking and broadcasting their lives on these social media sites," Greenfield says.

Though there aren't yet formal criteria for the disorder, Strohmman says that a diagnosis is possible if you have one or more of these symptoms: loss of time due to technology, withdrawal from people, negative consequences at work or in your relationships, and a higher tolerance for technology — like one game is no longer enough.

The Who and What of Addiction

Theoretically, anyone can become a technology addict, Strohmman says, but people with such conditions as depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder are more likely to become over-dependent on the Internet. In some cases, the technology addiction may cause these other conditions.

People with a strong history of addiction in their family may also be more likely to become technology addicts.

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What happens then? Too much time on the Internet can have physical health consequences. A study in the [Journal of Biomedicine and Biotechnology](#) found that Internet addicts had reduced levels of transporters for dopamine, the brain chemical that generates feelings of pleasure. This isn't surprising, Greenfield says, because dopamine is closely linked with Internet use. When people play online games or use technology for other leisure activities, the brain is overloaded with dopamine. Eventually, the dopamine receptors in the brain decrease their activity, and the dopamine stops creating pleasurable effects.

People addicted to technology are also more likely to develop computer vision syndrome, a group of [eye-related problems](#) that can cause blurred vision, headaches, and eye strain, Strohmman says. Spending hours playing online games also means you probably aren't getting enough physical activity — raising your risk for diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.

Overcoming Technology Addiction

Treatment plans usually begin with altering lifestyle habits to reduce technology usage. Greenfield typically employs a "detox period" during which no smartphones or computers are allowed.

"This resets the nervous system," he says. "Then we do a program of changing their behavior. We reduce how much they use, and identify the patterns they've set up around their use. Then we make modifications in those patterns."

In extreme cases, prescription medications may be used. "There are some medications that have shown some promise for compulsive behavior," Strohmman says. These include paroxetine (Paxil) and escitalopram (Lexapro).

If you're concerned you may be slipping into [technology addiction](#), you can also try making a few small changes at home:

- Have a no-technology day. Schedule a day every few weeks to put away your phones and computers for 24 hours.
- Get out there. Find things to do that don't involve being online — a hiking club, for example, or a crafting group.
- Time yourself. Every day, write down how many hours you've spent on your computer or smartphone. If your addiction is related to your mobile device, you can try apps like [BreakFree](#) or [Mental](#), which track your usage.