



Technology and Screen Use

If you are a young person today, you may have been told you are spending too much time on screens. As a post-secondary student, you use screens for many purposes: taking notes for your classes, listening to lectures, gaming, watching TV, and connecting with your friends and family.

This guide is about helping you understand how screens can affect your mental and physical health and how to use screens in a healthier and more balanced way. Let's explore how to make the most of screen time while supporting your well-being!

Going back to the basics – what is screen time?

Screen time refers broadly to the time you spend using electronic devices, such as phones, computers, tablets, and television. Screen time can be classified into “active use” and “passive use.” When it’s active, you’re mentally, socially, or physically engaged in screen-based activities, like chatting with your friends or editing YouTube videos. On the other hand, when it’s passive, it’s more like you’re just soaking in what’s on the screen, like watching videos or endlessly scrolling through social media.¹

It’s interesting how the same activity on your screen can be either active or passive, depending on your purpose.² For example, using social media to chat with friends is an active engagement because you’re interacting with people, but if you’re not actively engaged and are using it just to zone out, that’s a more passive way to use your screen.

And here’s a word you might have heard: “doomscrolling.” That’s when you can’t seem to stop scrolling through all the negative news and gloomy information on your phone or social media. Doomscrolling can trigger various emotions like sadness, anxiety, and uncertainty about the future.³

“What would our lives be like if our days and nights were as immersed in nature as they are in technology?”

Richard Louv



Unlocking the screen habits of post-secondary students

Canadian guidelines suggest limiting your recreational screen time to no more than 3 hours a day.⁴ Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 60% of post-secondary students spent an average of 3 to 4 hours per day on screens for recreational purposes, which was more than the recommended limit.⁴ But since the pandemic, and as life gradually returns to normal, students' daily screen usage, encompassing both educational and recreational activities, has surged to over six hours.⁵ Screen use didn't go back to the pre-pandemic levels even after most COVID restrictions were lifted.⁶

This could be due to several reasons. When schools closed, students had to shift to online learning, which meant more time spent on screens. Screens were used to stay connected with friends and family and to enjoy cultural gatherings during lockdowns. Young people might have also turned to screens to deal with feelings of stress and sadness or to escape from reality.

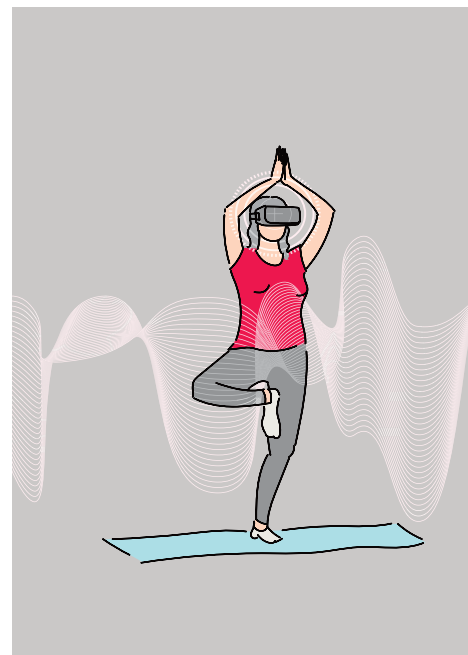
Spending excessive time on screens while you are a student can become a concern. The habits you develop during your formative years can have long-lasting effects and may not be beneficial to your health in the future. To find a healthy balance and evaluate how using electronic devices affects your physical and emotional well-being, regularly assess your screen use. By understanding potential long-term impacts, you can make adjustments to regulate it, find a balance and avoid excessive screen time.



How does screen time affect physical and mental health?

Physical health

The good news is that 3 out of 5 Canadian post-secondary students are hitting the mark when it comes to getting enough physical activity, spending at least 150 minutes every week on moderate-to-vigorous aerobic physical activity.⁴ But here's the flip side: even with regular activity, spending too much time in front of screens can have an impact on your physical well-being. Using screens can affect your eyesight, disrupt your sleep, and increase your stress levels. On top of that, some research has shown a link between significant amounts of screen time and physical problems such as insulin resistance (a hormone that controls your blood sugar), reduced bone strength, poor cognitive development, and even issues like high blood pressure, obesity, and low levels of HDL (the "good" cholesterol), which can put your heart health at risk.⁷



While using screens are fine in moderation, ensuring you make time to move your body will lessen the potential impact on your physical health.

Mental health

When it comes to the role of screens on mental health, research shows mixed findings. Some studies suggest that spending too much time on screens and exceeding the recommended limit of 3 hours can make people feel more anxious, sad, and stressed out.^{8,9} However, when experts look at all the evidence together, systematic reviews (which are studies that review the results of many high-quality studies) show that screens are more linked to depression than to anxiety.^{7,10,11} Screens can sometimes affect how you feel, but they're not the only thing in the picture, and we need more research to really understand it.

When it comes to social and emotional well-being, some studies show that chatting with friends on social media can give you a feeling of being supported.^{12,13} But it's important to keep in mind that online support might not be the same as the support you get from spending time with your friends and family in person.¹⁴ Interestingly, during the pandemic, it turned out that having one-on-one conversations with people online and having positive experiences could actually be good for overall well-being.¹⁵

Studies have found that the amount of time we spend on screens is connected to both our sleep habits and our level of physical activity.^{16,17} The time you spend on screens, how active you are, and your sleep patterns are all tied together, and they can all have an impact on your mental health.



Some researchers have explored the idea of swapping out certain activities for others and examining how it affects mental health. For teenagers, replacing screen time with sleep, homework, or physical activity can be highly beneficial.^{18,19} Spending time outdoors, often referred to as “green time,” can reduce stress and depression.²⁰

Screens can have both positive and less favourable effects on your mental well-being, depending on how you use them and coupled with the other activities you engage in.



Are you using screens too often?

Everyone is different in the amount of screen time that make sense for them and their lives. Noticing your feelings related to your screen use is a good way to check in if you are using screens too much. Sometimes, you might feel guilty, anxious, or sad when you use screens too much or not in a productive way. These feelings can happen for various reasons. You might feel pressured to always do something productive, compare yourself to others you see on social media, or try to meet other people's expectations.

When these thoughts or feelings creep in, they make your screen use experience less enjoyable, and can even lead to spending less time with your friends. It could even affect your academic performance at school.²¹ When the overuse of screens starts to have a negative impact on everyday life, people might notice they start to avoid responsibilities, experience feelings of guilt or isolation, have physical symptoms like eye strain, or experience withdrawal. Together these symptoms might describe a Screen Addiction Disorder.^{22,23}

It's really important to recognize these feelings and how they're affecting you. That awareness can help you make positive changes in how you use screens, have healthy relationships with others, and support your mental health.



Are screens always bad?

Using screens isn't always a bad thing. It all comes down to how and when you use them. In fact, there are a lot of good things about using screens.^{24,25} Screens can indeed be highly valuable in many ways!

- They allow you to gather information and learn new things.
- They play a vital role in helping students with disabilities access education and important information, promoting fairness and equal opportunities.
- Screens help you stay connected with your friends and family, which is crucial especially if you're an international student.
- Screens can boost your productivity and allow you to get your work done more efficiently.
- For some students, screens can even be a way to enhance physical health, like taking online exercise classes.

**Screens help
you stay
connected.**

How can you use screens in healthier ways?

According to Canadian guidelines, you should aim to keep your recreational screen time to no more than 3 hours each day.⁴ If you're a post-secondary student, it's not always easy to cut down on screen time that much. However, you can be more mindful about how you use screens.

It's important to set healthy boundaries. Think about when you really need to be on screens, like for schoolwork, and when you're using them for fun, like playing video games.

Here are some tips you can try to use screens in a healthier way, taking a harm reduction approach into consideration.²⁶

- Try using screens actively.
- Be purposeful about your screen time and recognize what makes you spend a lot of time on screens and how it affects your feelings.
- Have open conversations about screen use with your peers.
- Use social media to connect with friends and be part of positive online communities without comparing yourself to others.
- Make sure to schedule some screen-free time in your day and mix it up with offline activities.
- Practice good sleep hygiene and avoid using screens before bed.
- To help with that never-ending scroll of bad news, try setting a time limit for reading negative news and gradually reduce that time each day.





To find a healthy balance and evaluate how using electronic devices affects your physical and emotional well-being, regularly assess your screen use. By understanding potential long-term impacts, you can make adjustments to regulate it, find a balance, and avoid excessive screen time.

If you find it hard to combat excess screen use or control doomscrolling, don't hesitate to seek support. Remember, you are not alone and there's always someone to help you!



Extra resources

If you or someone you know is struggling with excessive screen use or doomscrolling, or if you want to understand how to use screens in a healthy way according to Canadian guidelines, please see the resources below or seek advice from a medical professional.

- Start building a healthy relationship with your screens by learning about the [five core healthy screen habits](#).
- The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health offers [treatment groups for technology use and gambling](#).
- Check out Media Smarts for [more information on excessive internet use](#).
- See this blog post on [using gamification to manage screen time](#).
- Refer to [The Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines](#) for recommendations to improve your overall well-being.



Disclaimer

This content was written for post-secondary students with the guidance of youth advisors and staff from the Knowledge Institute on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions, Kids Help Phone, Ontario 211, and Connex Ontario. No content within this resource should be taken as medical advice and should not be replaced by information or guidance from a qualified healthcare professional.

If you or someone you know has concerns about screen use, you or they can reach out to one of our professional counsellors or volunteer crisis responders 24/7. We're [Good2Talk](#) whenever you need us!

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