

# How to Know If You Have an Internet Addiction and What to Do About It

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Internet addiction is a behavioral addiction in which a person becomes dependent on use of the Internet, or other online devices, as a maladaptive way of coping with life's stresses. Internet addiction is becoming widely recognized and acknowledged, particularly in countries where it is affecting large numbers of people, such as South Korea, where it has been declared a national health problem. Much of the current research on the subject of Internet addiction has been carried out in Asia. It is also a growing concern in developed nations in North America and Europe.

## Top 5 Things to Know About Internet Addiction

1. Internet addiction is not yet an officially recognized mental disorder. Researchers have formulated diagnostic criteria for Internet addiction, but it is not included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5). However, Internet gaming disorder is included as a condition for further study, and Internet addiction is developing as a specialist area.

2. At least three subtypes of Internet addiction have been identified: video game addiction, cybersex or online sex addiction, and online gambling addiction.
3. Increasingly, addiction to mobile devices, such as cellphones and smartphones, and addiction to social networking sites, such as Facebook, are being investigated. There may be overlaps between each of these subtypes. For example, online gambling involves online games, and online games may have elements of pornography.
4. Sexting, or sending sexually explicit texts, has landed many people in trouble. Some have been teens who have found themselves in hot water with child pornography charges if they are underage.
5. Treatment for Internet addiction is available, but only a few specialized Internet addiction services exist. However, a psychologist with knowledge of addiction treatment will probably be able to help.

## Symptoms

As Internet addiction is not formally recognized as an addictive disorder, it may be difficult to get a diagnosis. However, several leading experts in the field of behavioral addiction have contributed to the current knowledge of symptoms of Internet addiction. All types of Internet addiction contain the following four components:

### Excessive Use of the Internet

Despite the agreement that excessive Internet use is a key symptom, no one seems able to define exactly how much computer time counts as excessive. While guidelines suggest no more than two hours of screen time per day for youths under 18, there are no official recommendations for adults. Furthermore, two hours can be unrealistic for people who use computers for work or study. Some authors add the caveat “for non-essential use,” but for someone with an Internet addiction, all computer use can feel essential.

Here are some questions from Internet addiction assessment instruments that will help you to evaluate how much is too much.

### How often do you:

- stay online longer than you intended?
- hear other people in your life complain about how much time you spend online?
- say or think, “Just a few more minutes” when online?
- try and fail to cut down on how much time you spend online?
- hide how long you’ve been online?

If any of these situations are coming up on a daily basis, you may be addicted to the Internet.

## Withdrawal

Although originally understood to be the basis of physical dependence on alcohol or drugs, withdrawal symptoms are now being recognized in behavioral addictions, including Internet addiction.

Common Internet withdrawal symptoms include anger, tension, and depression when Internet access is not available. These symptoms may be perceived as boredom, joylessness, moodiness, nervousness, and irritability when you can’t go on the computer.

## Tolerance

Tolerance is another hallmark of alcohol and drug addiction and seems to be applicable to Internet addiction as well. This can be understood as wanting—and from the user's point of view, needing—more and more computer-related stimulation. You might want ever-increasing amounts of time on the computer, so it gradually takes over everything you do. The quest for more is likely a predominant theme in your thought processes and planning.

## Negative Repercussions

If Internet addiction caused no harm, there would be no problem. But when excessive computer use becomes addictive, something starts to suffer.

One negative effect of internet addiction is that you may not have any offline personal relationships, or the ones you do have may be neglected or suffer arguments over your Internet use.

Online affairs can develop quickly and easily, sometimes without the person even believing online infidelity is cheating on their partner.

You may see your grades and other achievements suffer from so much of your attention being devoted to Internet use. You may also have little energy for anything other than computer use—people with Internet addiction are often exhausted from staying up too late on the computer and becoming sleep deprived.

Finances can also suffer, particularly if your addiction is for online gambling, online shopping, or cybersex.

## Internet Addiction in Kids

Internet addiction is particularly concerning for kids and teens. Children lack the knowledge and awareness to properly manage their own computer use and have no idea about the potential harms that the Internet can open them up to. The majority of kids have access to a computer, and it has become commonplace for kids and teens to carry cellphones.

While this may reassure parents that they can have two-way contact with their child in an emergency, there are very real risks that this constant access to the Internet can expose them to.

- Children have become increasingly accustomed to lengthy periods of time connected to the Internet, disconnecting them from the surrounding world.
- Children who own a computer and have privileged online access have an increased risk of involvement in cyberbullying, both as a victim and as a perpetrator.
- Children who engage in problematic internet use are more likely to use their cellphone for cybersex, particularly through sexting, or access apps which could potentially increase the risk of sex addiction and online sexual harms, such as Tinder.

In addition, kids who play games online often face peer pressure to play for extended periods of time in order to support the group they are playing with or to keep their skills sharp. This lack of boundaries can make kids vulnerable to developing video game addiction. This can also be disruptive to the development of healthy social relationships and can lead to isolation and

victimization.

Children and teens are advised to have no more than two hours of screen time per day.

## What to Do If You're Addicted to the Internet

If you recognize the symptoms of Internet addiction in yourself or someone in your care, talk to your doctor about getting help. As well as being able to provide referrals to Internet addiction clinics, psychologists, and other therapists, your doctor can prescribe medications or therapy to treat an underlying problem if you have one, such as depression or social anxiety disorder.

Internet addiction can also overlap with other behavioral addictions, such as work addiction, television addiction, and smartphone addiction.

If you or a loved one are struggling with an addiction, contact the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Helpline at **1-800-662-4357** for information on support and treatment facilities in your area.

For more mental health resources, see our National Helpline Database.

### A Word From Verywell

Internet addiction can have devastating effects on individuals, families, and particularly growing children and teens. Getting help may be challenging but can make a huge difference in your quality of life.

#### 11 Sources

Verywell Mind uses only high-quality sources, including peer-reviewed studies, to support the facts within our articles. Read our editorial process to learn more about how we fact-check and keep our content accurate, reliable, and trustworthy.

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## Additional Reading

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