

Transformation

Wellness, part 5: Lost in the scroll

25 June 2026

Key takeaways

- Heavy tech use can negatively impact the body, contributing to issues such as musculoskeletal strain, eye problems, hearing damage and disrupted sleep. Prolonged screen time also promotes sedentary behavior, increasing risks of obesity and related health conditions.
- Loneliness affects about 16% of people globally and is increasingly viewed as a major public health issue. At the same time, constant connectivity is driving "technostress," with frequent device use and notifications contributing to burnout and prompting policy responses like the right to disconnect.
- In the final installment of our Wellness series, we talk about consumers getting "lost in the scroll" – highlighting links between social media use, mental health risks, content overload and the growing challenge of misinformation.

Heavy tech use can physically impact the body

Heavy tech use can have a physical impact on the body, including musculoskeletal pain, eye strain and even increased obesity risk. These issues stem from prolonged, sedentary and often unergonomic interaction with screens.

“Tech neck”

Postural kyphosis – or “tech neck” – refers to stress placed on the neck when the head is repeatedly tilted downward to use digital devices. The average human head weighs 10-12 pounds, but when tilted at a 60-degree angle, the effective weight on the neck increases to roughly 60 pounds.¹ If the average 8-year-old weighs around 55 pounds² and the average person spends about seven hours per day looking at a screen,³ that load is comparable to carrying an 8-year-old on your neck for nearly 50 hours per week.⁴

Tech use can lead to inactivity

When people spend prolonged periods on the internet, they are more likely to be sedentary,⁵ increasing the risk of weight gain and cardiovascular issues.⁶ An American College of Cardiology study found that university students who used their smartphones for at least five hours per day had a 43% higher risk of obesity and were more likely to exhibit lifestyle habits associated with heart disease. While screens themselves may not directly cause weight gain, increased screen time can serve as a marker of an inactive lifestyle.⁷

Obesity remains one of the most pressing public health challenges of our time. More than one billion people globally are obese, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).⁸ This number could rise further: by 2035, more than half of the world’s population may be overweight or obese, with an estimated economic impact of \$4.3 trillion – roughly 4% of global GDP.⁹

¹ New York Spine Specialist.

² CDC.

³ Global Web Index.

⁴ Spine Health Foundation. (2017, October 30). *Backpacks and Text-Necks*.

⁵ Li, H., et al. (2023, January). *Association between Sedentary Behavior during Leisure Time and Excessive Weight in Chinese Children, Adolescents, and Adults*. National Library of Medicine.

⁶ Bouchard, C., & Lakka, T.A. (2005). *Physical activity, obesity and cardiovascular diseases*. National Library of Medicine.

⁷ Almond, E. (2018, November 7). *Can too much screen time affect our weight?* World Cancer Research Fund.

⁸ World Health Organization. (2026, April 30). *The WHO acceleration plan to stop obesity: a joint WHO/UNICEF operational model for designing and implementing the response*.

⁹ World Obesity Federation. (n.d.). *Economic impact of overweight and obesity to surpass \$4 trillion by 2035*.

Tech can strain the eyes

Digital eye strain (DES), or computer vision syndrome (CVS), refers a range of eye and vision-related problems caused by extensive tech use. Symptoms include headaches, eye discomfort, blurred or double vision, light sensitivity and red or dry eyes.

According to the American Osteopathic Association (AOA), spending two or more consecutive hours per day on screens is a primary risk factor for developing symptoms.¹⁰ Nearly 90% of Americans use digital devices for at least two hours per day, and 65% of Americans experience DES.¹¹

One study found that each additional hour of daily screen time is associated with 21% higher odds of developing myopia (i.e., near-sightedness).¹² According to the Brien Holden Vision Institute, the cost of uncorrected myopia to the global economy – in lost productivity alone – was \$244 billion in 2015.¹³ In 2000, the global myopic population was estimated at 1,406 million individuals (22.9% of the total population), with projections rising to 4,758 million individuals by 2050 (49.8% of the population).¹⁴

Tech use can contribute to hearing loss

Prolonged headphone use – especially in noisy environments or at high volume – can negatively affect hearing health.¹⁵ A normal conversation is about 60 decibels (dB), a busy street reaches around 70dB and earphones at maximum volume can range from 94dB to 110dB – well above the safety threshold (Exhibit 1).¹⁶ The risk of hearing loss begins around 70 dB,¹⁷ and sustained exposure above 85 dB can cause damage.¹⁸ On average, 19-29-year-olds spend 7.8 hours per week using headphones, compared with around five hours for those aged 30-79.¹⁹

Exhibit 1: Sounds above 70dB can be harmful

Illustrative examples of decibel ranges

| | Decibels (dB) | Examples |
|-------------------------------|---------------|---|
| Sounds below 70dB are safe | 20 | Ticking watch |
| | 30 | Leaves rustling / Whisper |
| | 30-50 | Average room noise |
| | 60 | Background music |
| | 70 | Average office noise |
| | 75 | Landscaping equipment (from inside a house) |
| Sounds above 70dB are harmful | 85 | City traffic (from inside a car) / Noisy restaurant |
| | 90 | Hairdryer |
| | 95-100 | Approaching subway train / Car honk at 16 feet / Pro sports games |
| | 100 | Motorcycle / Automatic hand dryer |
| | 105-110 | Nightclubs and bars / Gas-powered leaf blower / Ice cream truck |
| | 110 | Trombone / Dog barking in ear / Ice cream truck |
| | 110-120 | Rock or pop concert / Siren |
| | 130 | Jackhammer |
| | 135 | Jet engine (from 100 yards) |

Source: Hearing Health Foundation, BofA Global Research

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Tech can impact sleep patterns

While the blue light emitted from screens can support cognitive functions such as alertness, memory and emotion regulation, it can also disrupt sleep by suppressing the natural release of melatonin (the hormone that helps you wind down).²⁰ Based on an analysis of 122,058 participants in the American Cancer Society’s Cancer Prevention Study-3, daily screen use before bed was associated with a 33% higher prevalence of poor sleep quality compared with no screen use.²¹

¹⁰ American Optometric Association. (n.d.). *Computer vision syndrome*.

¹¹ Vision Council.

¹² Ha, A., et al. (2025, February). *Digital Screen Time and Myopia: A Systematic Review and Dose-Response Meta-Analysis*. National Library of Medicine.

¹³ Frick, K.D., et al. (2018, October). *Potential Lost Productivity Resulting from the Global Burden of Myopia: Systematic Review, Meta-analysis, and Modeling*. PubMed.

¹⁴ Fricke, T.R., et al. (2016, February). *Global Prevalence of Myopia and High Myopia and Temporal Trends from 2000 through 2050*. National Library of Medicine.

¹⁵ EarpieceOnline. (2025, June 17). *Do You Wear Earpieces or Earbuds Daily?* Hearing Health Foundation.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ National Council on Aging. (2025, November 17). *How to Prevent Hearing Loss*.

¹⁸ National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders. (n.d.). *Noise-Induced Hearing Loss*.

¹⁹ Dey, M. & Madrekar, A. (2025, November 18). *Headphones Statistics by Market Size, Usage, Ownership and Facts (2025)*. ElectroIQ.

²⁰ The Vision Council.

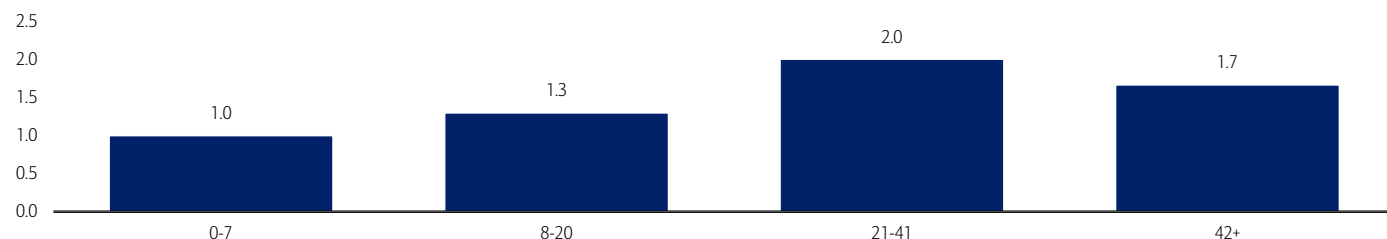
²¹ Diver, W. R., et al. (2025, March). *Electronic Screen Use and Screen Duration and Timing in Adults*. PubMed Central.

Screen time is replacing real-life social interaction

Beyond the physical effects, heavy tech use is also reshaping how people connect with one another (for more, read [Wellness, part 2: Fostering social connection](#)). Social and communication platforms can bring people together, but excessive screen time is beginning to replace real-life interaction. And without face-to-face communication, interactions may lose depth, contributing to loneliness and weaker social connections. A 2025 study found that adults in the upper 25% of social media use were more than twice as likely to experience loneliness versus those in the lower 25% (Exhibit 2).²²

Exhibit 2: Adults in the upper 25% of social media use are more than twice as likely to experience loneliness compared to the lower 25%

Social media use time, frequency and loneliness among a national sample of 30- to 70-year-old US adults (hours per week in quartiles)



Source: Gorman et al. CC BY 4.0, BofA Global Research

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Dependence on AI?

As in-person interactions decline, some people appear to be seeking digital alternatives. Between 2022 and 2025, the number of AI companion apps surged by 700%.²³ AI companions are designed to mimic aspects of human interaction, with some platforms offering friendship, mental health support or CBT (cognitive behavioral therapy) to help manage stress and anxiety (for more on this topic, check out [Wellness, part 3: Tech for mental health](#)).²⁴ A Harvard Business Review analysis identified therapy and companionship as the top reasons people used generative AI (genAI) tools in 2025 (Exhibit 3).²⁵

Exhibit 3: In a Harvard Business Review article, the top generative AI use case in 2025 was for therapy/companionship

Top 20 out of 100 generative AI use cases in 2025

| Rank (2025) | Rank (2024) | Use case | Category |
|-------------|-------------|--------------------------|--|
| 1 | 2 | Therapy/companionship | Personal & Professional Support |
| 2 | N/A | Organize my life | Personal & Professional Support |
| 3 | N/A | Find purpose | Personal & Professional Support |
| 4 | 8 | Enhance learning | Learning & Education |
| 5 | 47 | Generate code (pros) | Technical Assistance & Troubleshooting |
| 6 | 1 | Generate ideas | Content Creation & Editing |
| 7 | 6 | Fun and nonsense | Creativity & Recreation |
| 8 | 19 | Improve code (pros) | Technical Assistance & Troubleshooting |
| 9 | 27 | Creativity | Content Creation & Editing |
| 10 | 75 | Healthier living | Personal & Professional Support |
| 11 | 35 | Prepare for interviews | Learning & Education |
| 12 | 65 | Generate relevant images | Creativity & Recreation |
| 13 | 3 | Specific search | Research, Analysis & Decision Making |
| 14 | 12 | Simple explainers | Learning & Education |
| 15 | 25 | Cook with what you have | Creativity & Recreation |
| 16 | 7 | Troubleshoot | Technical Assistance & Troubleshooting |
| 17 | 9 | Personalize learning | Learning & Education |
| 18 | N/A | Boost confidence | Personal & Professional Support |
| 19 | 15 | Adjust tone of email | Content Creation & Editing |
| 20 | 41 | Explain legalese | Technical Assistance & Troubleshooting |

Source: Zao Sanders – Harvard Business Review article²⁶, BofA Global Research

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Some states are taking steps to regulate this area. In November 2025, New York passed a law requiring chatbots to remind users every three hours that they are not human. In California, Governor Gavin Newsom signed the Companion Chatbots Act – also

²² Abreu, C.A., et al. (2025, October 1). *Time and Frequency of Social Media Use and Loneliness Among US Adults*.

²³ Perez, S. (2025, August 12). *AI companion apps on track to pull in \$120M in 2025*.

²⁴ AI World Journal. (n.d.) *AI Companions: The Rise of Emotional Intelligence in Artificial Agents*.

²⁵ Zao-Sanders, M. (2025, April 9). *How People are Really Using Gen AI in 2025*.

²⁶ Ibid.

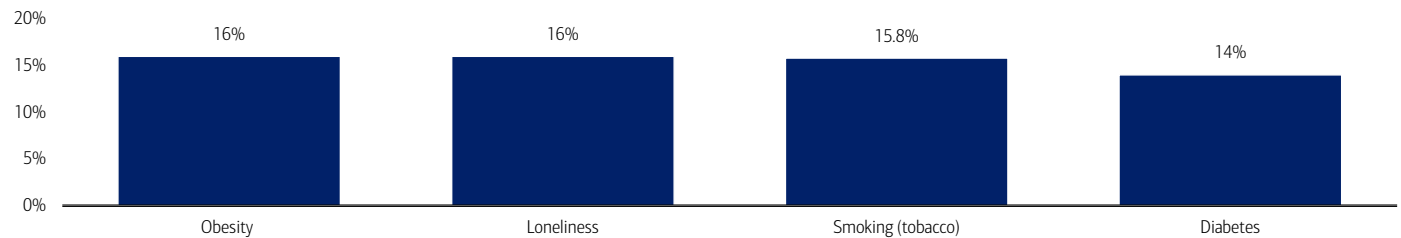
known as S.B. 243 – in October 2025. The law includes similar nonhuman disclosure notifications for users, prohibits chatbots from exposing minors to sexual content and mandates protocols in cases where users show suicidal ideation.²⁷

Loneliness is as prevalent as obesity, smoking and diabetes

These trends are unfolding against a broader backdrop of rising global loneliness. Today, loneliness affects approximately 16% of people worldwide.²⁸ At this level, it is as widespread as other major health issues, including smoking tobacco, diabetes and obesity (Exhibit 4). Despite this high prevalence, fewer than 20% of individuals who often or always feel lonely or isolated recognize it as a major problem.²⁹

Exhibit 4: Based on data from the World Health Organization (WHO), loneliness is just as widespread as other major health issues like obesity, smoking and diabetes

Prevalence of health conditions globally (%)



Source: WHO³⁰, BofA Global Research

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Loneliness is increasingly recognized as a priority public health problem

Given its scale and impact, loneliness is increasingly being recognized as a major public health issue. One study found that lacking social connection carries a health risk comparable to smoking up to 15 cigarettes per day.³¹ Today, some countries – including Denmark and Finland – have introduced national policy initiatives stressing the importance of loneliness as a public health and societal issue.³² For example, in 2018, the United Kingdom published its first national strategy on loneliness. In the US, former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy has also drawn attention to the issue, declaring loneliness an epidemic in spring 2023.

Digital pressure

“Technostress” and technostressors

At the same time, the digital devices shaping connection are also introducing new forms of stress. “Technostress” is a term coined by clinical psychologist Craig Brod in 1984, defined as “a modern disease of adaption caused by an inability to cope with new computer technologies healthily”.³³ The five components of technostress include:³⁴

- Techno-overload: Feeling overburdened by work-related tasks made easier or worse by technology.
- Techno-insecurity: Tension among workers who fear that technology may threaten their jobs.
- Techno-invasion: Technology encroaching on employees’ personal lives, increasing stress and reducing work-life balance.
- Techno-complexity: Challenges arising from complex systems and applications, which may lead to frustration or decreased efficiency.
- Techno-uncertainty: Lack of clarity around expectations tied to technological changes.

One study of 2,814 employees found that 20% reported experiencing techno-insecurity and techno-strain.³⁵ These conditions are associated with roughly twice the risk of poor mental health and high burnout (Exhibit 5). Contributing factors include constant connectivity, FOMO (fear of missing out), social comparison, information overload, digital burnout and concerns about privacy or job security.

²⁷ Governor Gavin Newsom. (2025, October 13). *Governor Newsom signs bills to further strengthen California’s leadership in protecting children online.*

²⁸ World Health Organization. (n.d.) *Social Isolation and Loneliness.*

²⁹ Office of the US Surgeon General. (2023). *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation.*

³⁰ World Health Organization (WHO). (2025, June 25). *Tobacco.*; WHO. (2024, November 14). *Diabetes.*; WHO. (2025, December 8). *Obesity and overweight.*; WHO. (n.d.). *Social Isolation and Loneliness.*

³¹ Office of the US Surgeon General. (2023). *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation.*

³² Alemdar, M., et al. (2026, March). *National policy responses to address loneliness: A global scoping review of 194 WHO member states.* ScienceDirect.

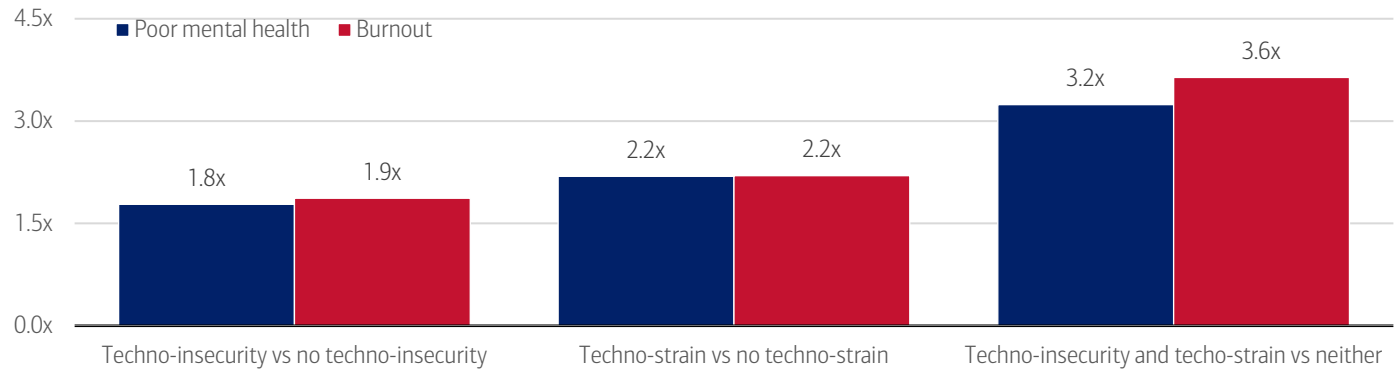
³³ Northern Kentucky University. (2022, January 26). *Technostress: Learning how to cope with information overload.*

³⁴ Cheng, W.J., et al. (2025, January). *Techno-strain and techno-insecurity are associated with poor mental well-being in specific age and occupation groups.* PubMed Central.

³⁵ Ibid.

Exhibit 5: Techno-insecurity and techno-strain associated with approximately twice the risk of poor mental health and high burnout

Increased likelihood of the following on either poor mental health or burnout



Source: PubMed Central³⁶, BofA Global Research

Note: Techno-strain is the degree to which an employee feels strained due to tech usage in connection with work tasks encompassing anxiety, fatigue, skepticism and feelings of inefficacy related to technology use.

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We check our phones almost 200 times per day

The modern attention environment is shaped by competing demands, including emails, texts and social media. In 2025, Americans checked their smartphones nearly 186 times per day on average.³⁷ Not all these instances are distractions, but when disruptions do occur (and depending on the task), it can take up to 23 minutes to fully regain focus.³⁸

Notifications trigger a small release of cortisol (the body's primary stress hormone). While a single notification may be minor, the cumulative effect of many throughout the day can keep the nervous system in a state of "hyper-vigilance," subconsciously anticipating the next alert.³⁹ Elevated cortisol levels can increase heart rate and blood pressure.⁴⁰ Constantly being "on" to access technology can contribute to "digital stress" or "telepressure" – a fixation on checking and quickly responding to messages.⁴¹

The right to disconnect

In response, policymakers are beginning to address these challenges. The right to disconnect is a legal concept allowing employees to refrain from work-related communication outside of contracted hours without penalty, enabling them to fully disconnect and enjoy personal time – except in cases of emergency or prior agreement (e.g., being "on call").⁴²

In the United States, there are no federal, state or local laws that establish a formal right to disconnect, although proposals have emerged in jurisdictions like California and New Jersey, building on earlier efforts from Washington state and New York City.⁴³ Internationally, however, the concept is more developed: France was an early adopter, embedding the right in its labor code in 2017, and a range of countries – primarily in Europe, along with jurisdictions such as Ontario, Canada and Australia (which enacted a national framework in 2024) – have adopted similar approaches, often requiring employer policies or limiting after-hours contact.⁴⁴

Social media can drive perfectionism and low self-esteem

In addition to these psychological effects, the nature of online content itself can also pose some challenges: the addictive nature of social media activates the brain's reward center via dopamine (the brain's "feel-good hormone").⁴⁵ Whenever a social media post is "liked," it gives a dopamine boost, but when the brain doesn't get that boost, it can impact an individual's sense of self-worth and adequacy.⁴⁶ Some social media platforms emphasize physical appearance (e.g., filters), and constant exposure to "perfect" altered images can increase self-consciousness. Social media use can also heighten feelings of FOMO or encourage social comparison.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Wheelwright, T. (2026, January 1). *Cell Phone Usage Stats in 2026*. Reviews.org.

³⁸ Reach Link. (2026, May 13). *Multitasking Myth: What Really Happens to Your Brain*.

³⁹ Health and Me.

⁴⁰ Mawri, S. (2022, August 23). *Beware High Levels of Cortisol, the Stress Hormone*.

⁴¹ Benenden Health. (n.d.). *Why being 'always on' can reduce productivity*.

⁴² Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). (n.d.). *What is the right to disconnect?*

⁴³ Yaqdoob, M.A. (2025, September 10). *The "Right to Disconnect" in the US? What Employers Need to Know About Emerging Proposals*. Akerman LLP.; (2024). *California A.B. 2751*; (2024). *New Jersey A.4852*.

⁴⁴ Bruce, M. et al. (2025, March 24). *The Right to Disconnect Across Jurisdictions*. Mayer Brown.

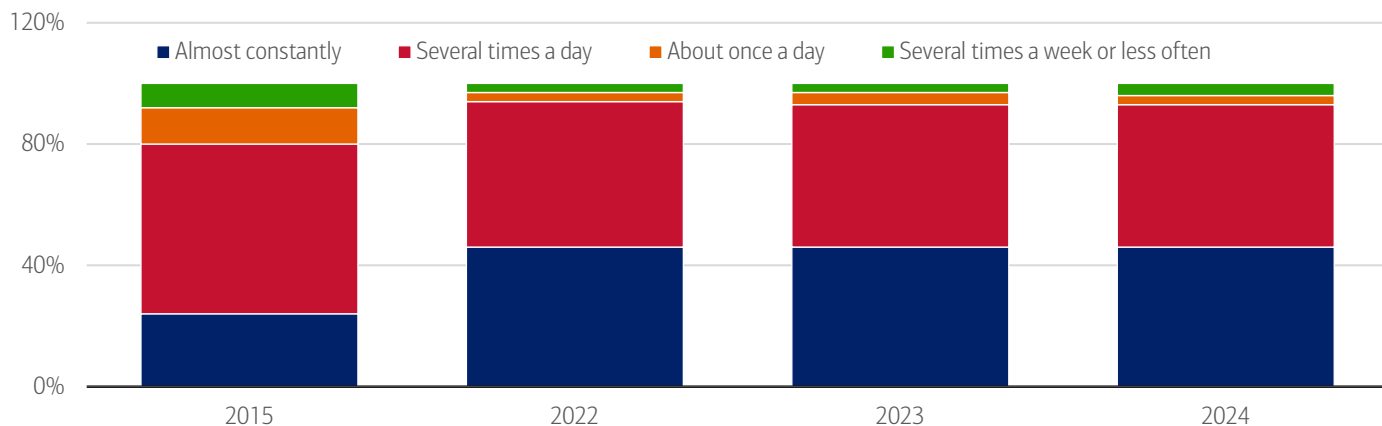
⁴⁵ University of California (UC) Davis Health. (2024, May 10). *Social media's impact on our mental health and tips to use it safely*.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Adolescents who spend more than three hours per day on social media face double the risk of developing symptoms of depression and anxiety.⁴⁷ According to a Pew Research survey, the share of teens who report being almost constantly online has more than doubled since 2014-15, with the average teenager currently spending roughly 3.5 hours per day on social media alone (Exhibit 6).⁴⁸

Exhibit 6: Share of teens online “almost constantly” has almost doubled since 2014-15

% of US teens aged 13-17 who say they use the internet by frequency



Source: Pew Research Center⁴⁹, BofA Global Research
 Note: Figures from 2015 depicted above were collected from 2014-2015.

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Policymakers increasingly take steps to protect minors

Many policymakers believe social media use is linked to minors’ well-being and are increasingly acting on concerns about addiction and mental health harms.⁵⁰ At the federal level, regulation remains limited and tends to be privacy-oriented. The Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), enacted in 1998, restricts data collection from children under 13 and continues to anchor platform age restrictions.⁵¹

On the state-level, legislation has accelerated, with nearly 20 states enacting laws governing minors’ access to social media, though many are under constitutional challenge.⁵² Litigation is also emerging as a key driver: hundreds of cases allege that platforms deliberately incorporate addictive design features that harm youth, with courts increasingly allowing core claims to proceed and recent jury verdicts finding liability tied to those design choices.⁵³ Typically, Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act shields online platforms from liability for content posted by users. However, recent lawsuits have argued – and some courts have agreed – that this protection does not extend to claims based on platforms’ addictive design features, rather than user-generated content.

Internationally, regulatory frameworks are more developed in certain respects, though uneven in practice. In the United Kingdom, the Online Safety Act (2023) establishes a regulator-led system of safety and design duties, with the government now moving to ban social media access for users under 16 as an extension of that broader oversight regime. Australia, by contrast, has adopted a statutory minimum social media age of 16, relying on a straightforward legal prohibition that places primary compliance responsibility on platforms.⁵⁴

At the same time, policymakers are increasingly targeting device use itself: more than two dozen US states now restrict or ban phones in schools, reflecting a broader push to limit always-on digital engagement among youth.⁵⁵

⁴⁷ Feder, K.A., et al. (2019, September 11). *Associations Between Time Spent Using Social Media and Internalizing and Externalizing Problems Among US Youth*. JAMA Psychiatry.
⁴⁸ Miech, R. A., et al. (2022). *Monitoring the Future: A Continuing Study of American Youth (8th- and 10th-Grade Surveys)*,
⁴⁹ Faverio, M., & Sidoti, O. (2025, December 9). *Teens, Social Media and AI Chatbots 2025*. Pew Research Center.
⁵⁰ Harvard Law Review. (2026, February). *Content Neutrality for Kids: Intermediate Scrutiny for Social Media Age-Verification Laws*.
⁵¹ (1998). *Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998*, 15 U.S.C. §§ 6501–6506.
⁵² National Conference of State Legislatures. (2026, April 7). *Social Media and Children 2026 Legislation*; The Age Verification Providers Association. (2026, April). *State laws for social media*.
⁵³ Social Media Victims Law Center. (2026, May 21). *Lawsuit Updates & History*.
⁵⁴ (2023). *Online Safety Act 2023*; (2024). *Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024*.
⁵⁵ Civic IQ. (2026, January 10). *26 States Now Require Cell Phone Bans: 2026 Policy Tracker*; Higham, A. (2026, January 9). *Map Shows US States with School Phone Bans in 2026*. Newsweek.

Potentially stressful and harmful content

And it's not just about message alerts or notifications – it's also about the content itself. Gen Z consumes news more than any other type of content, with six in ten feeling overwhelmed by current events.⁵⁶ Research from UK media regulator Ofcom, published in July 2025, found that 80% of 16-24-year-olds go online to get their news, with 75% turning specifically to social media.⁵⁷ However, news on social platforms is not always factual or reliable.

Deepfake videos – synthetically altered footage in which a person's face or body is digitally modified – can make some appear as doing or saying something they didn't.⁵⁸ Between 2018 and 2024, the number of deepfakes increased more than 500-fold. In addition, hallucination refers to instances where AI models generate output that appears plausible but is factually incorrect, irrelevant or nonsensical.⁵⁹ This can contribute to misinformation and disinformation,⁶⁰ making it harder to distinguish what is real from what is fake. We talk more about deepfakes and hallucination in [AI dictionary, part 3: Resources and risks](#).

⁵⁶ UNICEF. (n.d.). *Mental health study shows Gen Z overwhelmed but undeterred by unrelenting global crises*.

⁵⁷ Ofcom. (2025, July 11). *News consumption in the UK: 2025*.

⁵⁸ Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). *Deepfake*.

⁵⁹ Google Cloud.

⁶⁰ NTT Data. (n.d.) *Not All Hallucinations Are Bad: The Constraints and Benefits of Generative AI*.

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