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More teen TV time linked to depression: study

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NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Concerned that your adolescent is watching too much TV? A new study gives parents good reason to be concerned. Researchers reported this week that greater exposure to TV during the teenage years appears to raise the risk of depression in young adulthood, especially among males.

Dr. Brian A. Primack, of the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine and colleagues studied the media habits of roughly 4,100 healthy non-depressed adolescents. They asked the adolescents how many hours they spent during the last week watching TV or videos, playing computer games or listening to the radio.

The adolescents reported an average of 5.68 hours of media exposure each day, including 2.3 hours of TV viewing per day.

Seven years later (at an average age of 21.8), the study subjects were screened and 308 (7.4 percent) had developed symptoms of depression.

According to the report, published in the Archives of General Psychiatry, for each hour of TV viewed per day, the teens had a statistically significant greater likelihood of developing depression in young adulthood.

Given the same amount of media exposure, young women were less likely to develop symptoms of depression than were young men.

"We did not find a consistent relationship between development of depressive symptoms and exposure to videocassettes, computer games, or radio," they report.

There are several possible ways by which media exposure could boost the risk of depression, the researchers say. The time spent watching TV or using other electronic media may replace time spent socializing, participating in sports or engaging in intellectual activities - all of which may protect against depression.

Watching TV at night may disrupt sleep, which is important for normal brain and emotional development. In addition, messages transmitted through the media may reinforce aggression and other risky behaviors, interfere with identity development or inspire fear and anxiety, the researchers note.

This study, they conclude, "breaks new ground in linking media use in adolescence to the development of depressive symptoms in young adulthood."

SOURCE: Archives of General Psychiatry, February 2009.

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