

Video Gamers Older Than You Think

By Amanda Gardner, HealthDay Reporter

HealthDay

TUESDAY, Aug. 18 (HealthDay News) -- The average video gamer is not the stereotypical adolescent locked to a computer screen 24/7. The real players, according to a new U.S. survey, are 35-year-old adults, many of whom are overweight, socially introverted and possibly depressed.

The surprising findings also show that the health consequences of video gaming differ by gender, according to the research, which is published in the October issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

The Internet-based survey, one of the first to look at this age group, used 562 adults between the ages of 19 and 90 from the Seattle-Tacoma area of Washington state, the 13th largest media market in the United States with the highest Internet usage in the nation.

Forty-five percent of those sampled described themselves as video-game players -- more men (55.9 percent) than women (44.1 percent).

Female players had a higher rate of depression and much lower overall "health status" than female non-players. The researchers postulated that playing video games may be a type of "digital self-medication," a form of distraction for women.

Men who identified themselves as regular video-game players had a much higher body mass index (BMI) than male non-players, not surprising given the sedentary nature of the activity. Male video-game players also used the Internet overall considerably more often than their non-playing counterparts.

All the video gamers, despite gender, reported a greater reliance on the Internet for social support, according to the findings.

"Internet community support and time spent online distinguished adult video-game players from non-players, a finding consistent with prior research pointing to the willingness of adult video-game enthusiasts to sacrifice real-world social activities to play video games," the researchers reported.

Despite these negative health consequences, the lead author of the study said the picture is not black or white and could one day lead to positive ways to use this medium to benefit health.

"This helps us see better how adults play video games. It's not so much pros and cons," said the author, James B. Weaver III, a health communications specialist at the National Center for Health Marketing, part of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. "It's too soon to draw conclusions because these are just correlations, not evidence of causality."

But he added, "The public health community may need to think about the characteristics of players and tailor [health] interventions to their needs."

Much of the prior research into what has become an extremely popular pastime has focused on video-game players 18 and younger, suggesting that 59 percent to 73 percent in this age group are avid players.

In addition, a recent study found that 8.5 percent of young video-game players exhibit signs of being addicted to the activity. And younger players may also have a higher risk of aggression, being overweight and performing poorly in school.

But even though half of all American adults aged 18 to 49 play video games, as do 25 percent of those aged 50 and older, little research has been conducted on the health effects of their video gaming.

Outside experts stressed that this new portrait of Internet gaming is not all bad. (Indeed, a 2008 study found that playing video games may help older folks stay mentally sharp).

"We are often very much behind the curve when it comes to newer forms of media. They come out so quickly we don't have time to study everything," said Dr. Brian Primack, the author of an accompanying commentary in the journal and an assistant professor of medicine and pediatrics at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. "Whenever a new technology comes out,

there are potential benefits of it and potentially harmful things. It's good that we're starting to say, 'these are things we need to look out for'... Also to ask, 'what are the potential ways we could use this as a tool for health,' rather than say 'get rid of them all.' "

"In general, this is like everything. Balance is the key," said Marcia Ory, Regents professor of social and behavioral health at the Texas A&M Health Science Center School of Rural Public Health in College Station.

But she added, people need to keep in mind that the average age of people in this study is 35, not the 65- or 70-year-old widow who may benefit more from this type of activity.

"One needs to understand the social context in which people are engaging in these games," Ory said. "There are a lot of older people who are socially isolated, and Internet and gaming actually helps them with social support."

The growing popularity of video games, according to the journal commentary, can be illustrated by the fact that the video game "Halo 3" made more money on its first day than either the last "Harry Potter" movie or the recent "Star Wars" movie.

More information

The [Palo Alto Medical Foundation](#) has more on the health effects of video games.

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