

Internet Addiction-A Medical Student's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Internet addiction, also known as problematic internet use or pathological internet use, which is generally defined as problematic, compulsive use of the internet, that results in significant impairment in an individual's function in various life domains over a prolonged period of time. With online classes being the latest in medical education, students have more internet exposure when compared to their peers. After the inception of the World Wide Web, Internet addiction has developed into a global issue influencing varying segments of the population at different levels¹. Despite the wide range of benefits that the Internet provides us, there comes the issue of Internet addiction, also known as problematic internet use or pathological internet use, which is generally defined as problematic, compulsive use of the internet, that results in significant impairment in an individual's function in various life domains over a prolonged period of time. This article highlights the negative impact that internet addiction has on medical students affecting their sleep quality, academic performance and interpersonal relationships. Knowing these issues helps policy makers and educational institutions to implement mental health and educational organizations would design programs that focus on educating medical students to improve skills in building behavior plans and enhance their attempts in preventing development of internet addiction during their study period.

INTRODUCTION:

Internet addiction is an umbrella term that refers to the compulsive need to spend a great deal of time on the Internet, to the point where relationships, work and health are allowed to suffer¹. The person becomes dependent on using the Internet and needs to spend more and more time online to achieve the same high.

There is a range of behaviours that can be referred to as Internet addiction. Other terms for this addiction include Internet addiction disorder (IAD) and net addiction(2). After the inception of the World Wide Web, Internet addiction has developed into a global issue influencing varying segments of the population at different levels. Despite the wide range of benefits that the Internet provides us, there comes the issue of Internet addiction, also known as problematic internet use or pathological internet use, which is generally defined as problematic, compulsive use of the internet, that results in significant impairment in an individual's function in various domains of life over a prolonged period of time. With online classes being the latest in medical education, students have more internet exposure when compared to their peers. Young people are at particular risk of developing internet addiction disorder, and suffer health consequences resulting from loss of sleep, as they stay up later to chat online, check for social network status updates or to reach the next game levels. Medicine is an emotionally demanding training and therefore a career in medical education can sometimes be stressful.

The symptoms of internet addiction include euphoria when online, fatigue, sleep problems, muscle aches and pains resulting from inactivity, dry eyes or other eye problems, digestive issues, unintended weight loss or weight gain, and withdrawal symptoms. The signs of internet addiction include preoccupation with the internet, excessive time

online, problems at work or school, lying about internet use, neglecting personal hygiene, and withdrawal from face-to-face social interactions³.

59% of the global population i.e approximately 4.57 billion people are active internet users. India had a population of 1.39 billion in January 2021. India's population increased by 13 million between January 2020 and January 2021. There were 624 million internet users in India in January 2021. The number of internet users in India increased by 47 million between 2020 and 2021². People of all ages employ the internet for several purposes and with the COVID-19 lockdown, online education has become the latest trend. Boredom from the lockdown has also caused many young people to use social media apps more often. While students benefit greatly from online classes, surfing the internet for many hours causes a negative impact on their overall health and well-being. Many studies show how internet addiction negatively affects a student's mental health causing depression or anxiety. No studies have been done in Chengalpattu population on this topic. Hence a study was conducted that assessed internet addiction among medical students and how it affects their sleep quality that would ultimately affect their academic performance and health.

PHYSICAL HEALTH EFFECTS OF INTERNET ADDICTION :

Obesity is a major problem arising out of internet addiction. Medical students adopt a sedentary lifestyle as it is by sitting down with their books. Added to this being glued to their mobile phones or laptops leaves little to no time for physical activity and contributes to obesity. Too much use of internet can also affect growth and development, especially for teenagers and young adults⁴.

Dry eyes is a common problem with overuse of digital devices. Extended screen time leads to eye strain, dryness, and discomfort, commonly referred to as digital eye strain or computer vision syndrome. Symptoms include blurry vision, headaches, and difficulty focusing. A 2018 paper by *Balhara et al.*, titled, "Problematic Internet Use among Students in South-East Asia: Current State of Evidence" reviewed 38 studies on problematic internet use among students in Southeast Asia, a region with high internet and gaming addiction rates. Findings showed 19% of participants reported experiencing eye strain³.

Additionally musculoskeletal side effects like neck & back spasms, cervical spondylitis, lower back pain and sciatica may occur. Certain digestive issues like GERD (gastro esophageal reflux disease), constipation and irritable bowel syndrome may result. Insomnia is a serious issue where many students suffer from lack of sleep. Changes in their circadian rhythm which can affect various bodily functions. Factors like jet lag, shift work, and lifestyle habits can alter these rhythms, leading to sleep difficulties, daytime fatigue, and potential health issues. Unintended weight loss and weight gain are also some consequences when physical health is concerned⁵.

PSYCHIATRIC ILL EFFECTS OF INTERNET ADDICTION:

The mental health of medical students is greatly affected by excessive internet use. Obsessive compulsive disorder, depression, stress, anxiety, poor family and personal relationships, anger displacement are common with overuse of digital devices.

The growing number of researches on Internet addiction indicates that Internet addiction is a psychosocial disorder and its characteristics are as follows: tolerance, withdrawal symptoms, affective disorders, and problems in social relations. Internet usage creates psychological, social, school and/or work difficulties in a person's life. Eighteen percent of a study participants were considered to be pathological Internet users, whose excessive use of the Internet was causing academic, social, and interpersonal problems⁶.

Problematic Internet use may be associated with subjective distress, functional impairment and Axis I psychiatric disorders. In addition, many studies have reported associations between Internet addiction and psychiatric symptoms, such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, self-efficacy, etc among adolescents. Depression is the most frequently reported psychiatric symptom associated with Internet overuse⁶. Both these physical and mental health effects can lead to poor academic performance of the medical students.

CONCLUSION:

The positive correlation between presence of internet addiction and poor sleep quality was established. Through this study we hope that mental health and educational organizations would design programs that focus on educating medical students to improve skills in building behavior plans and enhance their attempts in preventing development of internet addiction during their study period⁷. Parents can also effect positive change in their children, by regulating their sleep patterns, charging electronic devices in another room apart from the bedroom to prevent late-night log ins. They can also encourage the practice of other hobbies to serve as a source of distraction. The growing burden of internet addiction needs to be addressed immediately and necessary intervention must be given, before it progresses to behavioral problems among medical students and hinders their future academic prospects.

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