

Coping with COVID-19: How Young People Use Digital Media to Manage Their Mental Health

Fact sheet: Digital health practices among U.S. teens and young adults (age 14–22) at risk for problematic substance use

This fact sheet presents data from a nationally representative survey of more than 1,500 14- to 22-year-olds in the U.S., conducted in September–November 2020 by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago, on behalf of Common Sense, the California Health Care Foundation, and Hopelab. The survey included a screener (CRAFT) to identify youth at risk for problematic substance use. The complete survey findings, methodology, quotes from participants, and text of the questionnaire are available [here](#).

One in 10 U.S. teens and young adults (9%) are at risk for problematic substance (drug and/or alcohol) use.

- The risk for problematic substance use does not significantly vary across age groups (9% for teens age 14–17 and 10% for young adults age 18–22).
- The risk for problematic substance use does not significantly vary across race/ethnicity (9% for Black youth, 12% for Hispanic/Latinx youth, and 9% for White youth).
- The risk for problematic substance use does not significantly vary across gender (9% for female youth and 9% for male youth).
- Young people who have had a coronavirus infection themselves or in the family are at a significantly higher risk for problematic substance use, compared to others their age (14% vs. 9%).
- LGBTQ+ youth are at significantly higher risk for problematic substance use, compared to non-LGBTQ+ youth (19% vs. 9%).

A majority of young people at risk for problematic substance use have connected with health care providers online.

- 60% have connected with health care providers online, through tools such as video appointments (41%), online messaging (27%), texting (17%), or other apps (15%). By comparison, 46% of those not at risk have connected with a provider online through one or more of these tools.

The vast majority of teens and young adults at risk for problematic substance use are accessing digital health tools, and they are doing so at an even higher rate than others their age.

- 96% have looked up health information online (compared to 84% of those not at risk).
- 78% have used a health-related mobile app (compared to 68% of those not at risk).
- More than half (57%) have tried to find others online with health concerns similar to their own (compared to 38% of those not at risk).

Young people most at risk for problematic substance use are searching for information and resources on relevant topics.

- Nearly half (46%) of all teens and young adults at risk for problematic substance use have gone online to look for information on drug and alcohol abuse (compared to just 15% of those not at risk), and nearly two-thirds (63%) have searched for information about smoking or vaping (compared to 19% of their peers). In fact, "smoking or vaping" was the second-most popular health topic researched online by these youth (following depression).
- Other health issues young people at risk for problematic substance use are most likely to have investigated online include depression (66%, compared to 35% of those not at risk), anxiety (57%, compared to 40% of their peers), and stress (58%, compared to 36% of their peers).
- A relatively small proportion of those at risk for problematic substance use say they have used mobile apps directly related to drug and alcohol problems (13%, compared to 2% of those not at risk). Fewer still have used apps specific to quitting smoking or vaping (8%, compared to 2% of their peers).
- Much larger proportions have used apps on other health topics, such as sleep (41%, compared to 25% of those not at risk), meditation (27%, compared to 16% of their peers), and stress reduction (28%, compared to 12% of their peers).

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