**U.S. Surgeon General: We need to protect kids from social media risks immediately**

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[**Lauren Feiner**](https://www.cnbc.com/lauren-feiner/)[**@LAUREN\_FEINER**](https://twitter.com/lauren_feiner)

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**KEY POINTS**

* U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy warned in a new advisory Tuesday that widespread social media use among kids and teens poses a significant mental health risk that needs to be addressed immediately.
* Social media is used almost universally, the report says, with up to 95% of youth between ages 13 and 17 reporting using it.
* In the latest advisory, Murthy concedes that social media can have both positive and negative effects on kids.



**United States Surgeon General Vivek Murthy delivers remarks during a news conference with White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki at the White House in Washington, July 15, 2021.**

*Tom Brenner | Reuters*

U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy warned in a new [advisory](https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf) Tuesday that widespread social media use among kids and teens poses a significant mental health risk that needs to be addressed immediately.

Such advisories are “reserved for significant public health challenges that require the nation’s immediate awareness and action,” according to a report released by the surgeon general’s office. The report is based on “a substantial review of the available evidence” on the impact of social media.

It’s not the first time Murthy has called out social media as contributing to a public health threat. In 2021, he issued an [advisory](https://www.cnbc.com/2021/07/15/surgeon-general-urges-us-to-fight-against-covid-misinformation.html) about the threat of Covid misinformation and called on social media companies to make changes that favor fact-based sources. He’s also previously said that age [13 is “too early”](https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/29/health/surgeon-general-social-media/index.html) to use social media.

In the latest advisory, Murthy concedes that social media can have both positive and negative effects on kids. Social media is used almost universally among youth, the report says, with up to 95% of people between ages 13 and 17 reporting using it. The report says that social media use in kids and teens can result in both “heightened emotional sensitivity” that can lead to lower life satisfaction as well as positive spaces of community, information and self-expression. The sense of community young social media users may get online could be even more significant for kids from marginalized backgrounds, the report said.

“A majority of adolescents report that social media helps them feel more accepted (58%), like they have people who can support them through tough times (67%), like they have a place to show their creative side (71%), and more connected to what’s going on in their friends’ lives (80%),” according to the report.

Still, social media use can be potentially harmful, leading to or exacerbating eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression, according to studies the surgeon general’s office cited.

“At this time, we do not yet have enough evidence to determine if social media is sufficiently safe for children and adolescents,” the report says. “We must acknowledge the growing body of research about potential harms, increase our collective understanding of the risks associated with social media use, and urgently take action to create safe and healthy digital environments that minimize harm and safeguard children’s and adolescents’ mental health and well-being during critical stages of development.”

Some areas where the surgeon general’s office calls for more research include distinguishing the impact on the health of in-person versus digital social interactions, what kind of content results in the most harm to young users and what factors can protect kids from harmful effects of social media use.

Even though more research is needed, the surgeon general warns that action can’t wait.

“Our children and adolescents don’t have the luxury of waiting years until we know the full extent of social media’s impact. Their childhoods and development are happening now,” the report says. “At a moment when we are experiencing a national youth mental health crisis, now is the time to act swiftly and decisively to protect children and adolescents from risk of harm.”

The warning dovetails with calls from parents, Congress and the [president](https://www.cnbc.com/2023/02/07/biden-state-of-union-to-target-social-media-and-kids-mental-health.html) to pass laws that will create greater protections for kids online. Still, figuring out how to do that [without unintentionally creating new harms to self-expression or privacy](https://www.cnbc.com/2023/05/02/updated-kids-online-safety-act-aims-to-fix-unintended-consequences.html) can be challenging.

The surgeon general lays out several recommendations for policymakers, tech companies, parents and caregivers, young social media users and researchers. They include:

For policymakers:

* Create “age-appropriate health and safety standards.”
* Require more data privacy protections for kids.
* Fund future research.
* Support digital- and media-literacy education in schools.
* Require tech companies to share health-related data.

For tech companies:

* Run independent assessments on the impact of their products on kids.
* Share findings and underlying data with researchers.
* Have timely systems to address complaints and requests from young users and their families and educators.
* Prioritize health and safety in designing products.

For parents and caregivers:

* Set expectations about how technology should be used.
* Create “tech-free zones” like at dinner or before bedtime.
* Create shared practices around social media with other parents.

For kids and teens:

* Seek help if they or a friend are being harmed by social media, like by finding expert information on the National Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health or by calling or texting the suicide hotline 988 if they or a friend are in crisis.
* Be careful about sharing too much information on social media
* Report online harassment or abuse.

For researchers:

* Determine best practices for healthy social media use.
* Create standardized definitions and measurements to discuss social media and mental health outcomes.
* Determine the role of the developmental stage on the progression of poor mental health outcomes as a result of social media use.