

What doctors want patients to know about social media's health impact

MAR 20, 2026



Sara Berg, MS

News Editor

Many people enjoy staying connected on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, Snapchat and X, formally known as Twitter. Yet a growing body of research is finding that excessive use can exacerbate mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression, in teens and young adults. Such use can also lead to social isolation and fear of missing out. That's why it is important to understand the potentially harmful impact of social media platforms for younger users.

The AMA's What Doctors Want Patients to Know™ series gives physicians a platform to share what they want patients to understand about today's health care headlines.

For this installment, three AMA members took time to discuss what doctors want patients to know about the potentially harmful effects of social media. They are:

- [Nusheen Ameenuddin, MD, MPH](#), a pediatrician in Rochester, Minnesota, and chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Communications and Media.
- [Jesse Hinckley, MD, PhD](#), a child and adolescent psychiatrist at HCA Healthcare's Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center in Idaho Falls, Idaho. He also serves as the program director for the psychiatry residency training program, which is one of HCA Healthcare's 365 Graduate Medical Education programs across the organization's 85 teaching hospitals.
- [Carl Streed Jr., MD, MPH](#), an internist and associate professor of medicine in Boston.

[HCA Healthcare](#) is part of the [AMA Health System Member Program](#), which provides enterprise solutions to equip leadership, physicians and care teams with resources to help drive the future of medicine.

Social media use can be harmful

“We see a lot of youth coming in with suicidal ideation, with body image issues, [with anxiety](#), and oftentimes social media or bullying are components of what's [stressing them out](#),” said Dr. Hinckley. “When we think about factors that may contribute to mental health problems, we know that the exposure to social media” can play a significant role.

“About 95% of youth are estimated to be on social media,” he added, noting that one study found “that around three hours or more of social media exposure a day doubles the risk of having some sort of mental health problem.”

This is concerning because one report found that about half of children between 12 and 17 had four hours or more of screen time daily.

Comparisons can affect you

There is research that suggests some of the potential harms of social media usage may be tied to the idea of comparison.

This means “using social media as a way to compare yourself to what people are presenting on social media, particularly Instagram,” said Dr. Streed.

“Sometimes that’s looking at celebrities and seeing their fabulous life and thinking, ‘My life isn’t as fabulous,’ or even with some friends, comparing who has the better outfit or house,” said Dr. Ameenuddin. “That can actually be a trigger that can lead to decreased mood.”

“But when these same kids use social media and are not using it for social comparisons—they’re just using it to connect with friends or stay in touch—then it can actually be quite positive, and they don’t have those feelings of negativity about themselves and there isn’t as much FOMO, or the fear of missing out,” she added.

Dr. Streed noted that when people post to social media, they “are presenting their best self, their best lives or best versions of their lives, and that constant comparison when people are scrolling is what is believed to lead to harm.”

“You look at social media and it’s often this staged reality,” said Dr. Hinckley. For example, “I put up my vacation pictures, but I didn’t put up the day that I wasn’t feeling great and I had a virus or I don’t put up the day that work was hard.”

“Those aren’t posts that you really see,” he said. “And then when you think about influencers and how much of that stuff is produced and staged, it really creates this sense of this alternate reality that other people compare themselves to.”

“As we get older, there might be more maturity to recognize how your comparisons can affect you,” Dr. Streed said. But it is especially difficult “for kids who don’t have their frontal lobe and executive functions of the brain mature yet.”

There are differences by gender

“We start to see some differences by gender. For example, with young women, we start to see a lot more concerns around anxiety and body image comparison to others,” said Dr. Hinckley. “Among young men, we start to see more [social isolation](#) and apathy.”

Additionally, “social media is socially engineered and that definitely can affect the dopamine reward system. Young men seem to be particularly vulnerable to that,” he said. “That causes them to separate and disengage from the real world a little bit and then become more apathetic and that can then settle into more depression.”

“We also know that youth get exposed to things on social media that they might not see in the real world,” Dr. Hinckley said. “So, we definitely have cases of youth who have been desensitized to things that should be traumatizing.”

Some are more vulnerable to the harms of social media

“There are certain groups that are more vulnerable to social media and the effects of social media,” said Dr. Hinckley. “Brain development takes up through 25 years old and the parts of your brain that develop first are your emotional decision center and your reward-based decision center.”

“Then as you get older and that front part of your brain develops; then you can start making more executive functioning type decisions where you’re able to think through consequences and those types of things,” he explained. “So, the younger you are, or the more you have reward and emotion-based decision making, the higher the risk that being exposed to social media can affect your decision making and some of those consequences.”

“We also know that some individuals who are already experiencing mental health challenges may be more vulnerable to certain effects of social media,” Dr. Hinckley said. “For example, a young person who is dealing with anxiety or struggling with body image concerns may more susceptible to some of the potentially harmful content they encounter online.”

“Some young people such as those who are part of racial or ethnic minority groups, religious minority groups, individuals with disability, or those who identify as LGBTQ+ may face higher risk of cyberbullying,” he said. “It’s really easy for people to post hurtful comments on social media when they aren’t interacting with someone face-to-face.”

However, these groups also stand to benefit most from social media via identity management, agency and social connectedness.

“It’s clear that individuals who may think in more rigid ways, or who have challenges with impulsivity—including some youth on the autism spectrum—can be more vulnerable to certain types of content on social media,” Dr. Hinckley said. “It really becomes incumbent upon parents, caregivers, guardians, mental health professionals and other supportive adults to work collaboratively with families and youth to help make social media use as safe and healthy as possible.”

Adults can be affected too

“While there is a degree of maturity as we get older in terms of understanding what social media does present, there’s probably still potential harm for adults or persons of any age as it relates to this tendency to compare ourselves to the images we’re presented,” said Dr. Streed.

Social media “can totally impact adults,” said Dr. Ameenuddin. This is because social media is “very targeted,” which can be “hard for adults” as well as teens and younger children.

Sleep can be interrupted with social media use

“One of the most impactful ways that social media can affect youth or screen use in general is actually with their sleep,” said Dr. Hinckley. “When we’re working with kids and their mental health at HCA Healthcare—a health care system that cared for more than 92,000 inpatient behavioral health admissions and 168,000 outpatient visits last year—we’ve found that if they’re not sleeping well, the chances of their mental health improving is not great.”

“As pediatricians, we generally tell people if your time on media—or your use of devices—is interfering with sleep, we really want to make sure that we have some boundaries in place,” said Dr. Ameenuddin.

“I always get a little bit of a laugh and eye roll from patients when I ask, ‘What’s the latest you’re on a screen,’” said Dr. Streed. “And their response is often, ‘Until I close my eyes and try to go to bed.’”

“The light itself is not helping and then, of course, if the interaction is causing negative thoughts, that’s also not helping,” he said, advising patients to make sure their last [screen time](#) happens 30 minutes to an hour before retiring to bed.

“Then put the phone away. Don’t keep the phone by your bed, things like that,” Dr. Streed added. “Or even just using features that reduce our reward center when we’re using social

media, because these programs, these apps, are really designed to get your attention.”

“The push notification, the bright colors, the use of red for notifications, all of these trigger you to want to open it up and use it,” he said, adding that “you can either desaturate the color—getting rid of the color helps reduce some of that reward-center component—or just making sure that we’re reducing blue-light exposure, which actually keeps you awake.”

Watch out for these warning signs

“Look for changes in sleep patterns. When your kid is staying up later at night and they’re having a harder time getting up in the morning, do they have access to screens at night? Are they on social media at night?” said Dr. Hinckley. “There are several professional organizations that have recommended limiting screen time before bed to help you be able to maximize your sleep, so that’s one of the first things that we would look at.”

“One of the other common problems we see is a change in mood or behavior. Is your child saying and doing things they wouldn’t have been saying and doing a couple of months ago? For example, are they more irritable?” he said. “A lot of it is looking at changes in sleep, mood and behavior to give you some hints that your kids might be struggling.”

“Strengths-based prevention strategies are really important to improving emotional resilience among youth and lower the risk of behavioral health problems. One of the things I’m encouraged by is seeing more prevention and awareness efforts aimed at younger kids,” Dr. Hinckley said. “For example, the HCA Healthcare Foundation helped support the development of the Girl Scouts’ Mental Wellness Patch program, informed by HCA Healthcare behavioral health experts, the National Alliance on Mental Illness and the Girl Scouts of the USA Program Advisory Committee, which is now available nationwide. Programs like that help girls learn how to recognize their emotions, build coping skills and feel more comfortable asking for help before a crisis develops.”

There’s a lot of inaccurate information on social media

“In the era in which we live, there’s a lot of mistrust. What’s real and what’s not is debated more than it probably has been in any other generation,” said Dr. Hinckley. “HCA

Healthcare and the AMA both strive to be at the forefront of healthcare information—how do you help get correct information out in front of people?”

“Inaccurate information takes off like a fire. If I said I read it on social media, people think that it must be true,” he said. “There’s no replacement for actually talking with experts—whether it’s consulting with your physician or looking at reputable medical resources online.”

“There’s no alternative or real replacement for looking for reliable sources of information that just want to help you live your healthiest life,” Dr. Hinckley said. “You can mass produce things now. It’s so easy to flood the internet with information. Because of this, it is imperative that we check to see if information we are consuming is accurate.”

It’s good to take a break from social media

“If you’re finding that your child is using it more for” comparing their life to someone else’s, “it’s hard to pull kids out of that, but it’s also important to be able to set limits and say, ‘Maybe we need to take a break from this for a while,’” said Dr. Ameenuddin. “Sometimes kids and teens have also said, ‘I felt like I needed a break and after a week of being off, I felt better.’”

“It’s good to take breaks once in a while and say, ‘If this content is bothering me, I’m maybe not going to follow that account anymore,’” she said, adding that it is important to “focus on important things that keep you grounded.”

Think about limits on social media and screen time

It is important to have discussions about healthy social media use and setting social media and screen time limits early on before kids start using social media, even if there aren’t signs of harmful effects. But it is going to vary for different situations and people.

“There are certainly kids who do online school nowadays,” said Dr. Hinckley. “That’s become much more common than it was before.”

“Children may also be isolated and for a lot of reasons their social world exists online. So, there are multiple factors to consider and to balance, but you have to find that sweet spot of how much is too much for your kid,” he said. Also, remember “the number that has come up from research is around that three-hour timeframe. But certainly for some kids, it’s going to be much less than that.”

Set up technology-free zones

Beyond limiting time on social media or on phones, think “about setting up technology free zones,” said Dr. Hinckley. “One of the things that really protects kids—both in terms of mental health and substance use—is having quality time with family members and caregivers.”

It’s about “how do we set up those quality spaces and quality times, such as dinner, that can be technology free zones,” he said. “Similarly, schools are struggling with how to create technology free zones to enhance learning.”

“Think about how you create that family media plan in terms of the rules around screen time, blocks around protected family time—whether that’s family dinner or homework time—and then thinking about sleep and having a consistent bedtime for youth is so important,” Dr. Hinckley said. “Protect that time before bed, at least 30 minutes to an hour, to get off screens.”

Be explicit about your use

Dr. Streed recommends avoiding the habit of relying on social media to relieve boredom. Instead, have “very discrete times when you plan on using it, be very specific about how you’re using it and what your goal is for using social media in general,” he said. “And being very particular about how it makes you feel.”

For example, are you following a celebrity, brand or social media maven “because this person is inspiring and that actually motivates you to want to do better and you feel good about that,” he added. Or, alternatively, does that social media presence instead inspire

jealousy or body-image issues?

“That constant negative emotion—we need to be mindful of and aware of,” Dr. Streed said.

“Then you just have to unfollow or delete it from your phone.”

So set “realistic expectations and be explicit about what your goal is for participating in social media,” said Dr. Streed.

“As somebody who is very focused on LGBTQ health in terms of clinical care, education and research, it’s a way to engage folks around those topics,” he said. “It’s all about what your goals are for using it.”

Know what credible medical information is

“The acronym that I like to use is SIFT. It stands for Stop, Investigate the source, Find better resources, and trace the claims back to the original evidence,” said Dr. Hinckley.

“When you think about sifting through what you’re hearing—these posts, these soundbites, these images—they’re designed to draw an emotional response right away.”

“They want you to repost that before you even think about it. They want you to have some sort of emotional response to the content,” he added. “Thinking about that reward center or that emotional decision center, they want to draw on those two things with social media so that they can get you to do something impulsively before you have time to stop and think.”

“That’s why it is important to think about what the credible sources of information are. You think about the resources that HCA Healthcare has as one of the nation’s largest providers of mental health services, or that the AMA makes available or that the American Academy of Child Adolescent and Psychiatry has and so many other organizations,” Dr. Hinckley said. “These organizations are busy trying to put this information out in front of people so that when they do try to find a better resource or when they try and trace things back to original evidence, they have resources that come from trusted names.”

Find the right balance

“It’s a double-edged problem. On the one hand, social media has some real benefits and some real strengths,” Dr. Hinckley said. “You can connect, communicate and organize a lot faster through social media.”

“Social media can help bring people out of isolation, can help families and friends stay connected,” he added. “On the other hand, we don’t know that balance. We don’t know that any amount of social media is really safe for kids and we don’t really know how much is too harmful.”

“That’s where it really becomes important for families to find what’s the right balance for you and for your kids,” Dr. Hinckley said. “It’s not a matter of should we have social media, or shouldn’t we, it’s a matter of how we use it to find the right balance.”

“Addressing this isn’t something families have to do alone,” Dr. Hinckley said. “Across HCA Healthcare’s network of care, we’ve partnered with community organizations and national groups to raise awareness and support youth mental wellness. The more we normalize conversations about mental health and provide accessible education, the more likely kids are to seek help early.”

Talk with your physician

“If you feel like your child is not sleeping as well, if they feel like they’re struggling more with anxiety or depression or self-image issues, and those things are really starting to cause some distress and it’s lasting a couple of weeks, seek out professional help,” said Dr. Hinckley. “If they’re having thoughts of hurting themselves or wishing they were dead, they certainly should seek out professional help.”

“And if they’re concerned that they can’t keep themselves safe, they should be using crisis resources like 988, the local emergency department or the crisis center,” he added, noting there are so many resources to help including “in school resources, intensive outpatient resources, telehealth and digital care to be able to get to them wherever they are and be able to provide care for them.”