

Mums encouraged to switch off for their mental health

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Dr Megan Teychenne

A world first Australian study has found a link between modern screen-based sedentary behaviours and anxiety risk in mothers of young children aged under five years.

The study, "Associations between Screen-Based Sedentary Behaviour and Anxiety Symptoms in Mothers with Young Children", was published recently in [PLOS ONE](#).

Dr Megan Teychenne from the [Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition \(IPAN\)](#) at Deakin University and lead researcher on the study, said maternal anxiety has been shown to be a key predictor of child anxiety, so it is critical to identify strategies to reduce the

risk of anxiety in mothers.

"Women are a high risk group for developing anxiety, with women aged 25-34 years almost twice as likely to experience an anxiety disorder compared to men of the same age. The risk of anxiety has been shown to peak between the ages of 25-44, which are the key childbearing years for women.

"At the same time, there is some limited data available that shows women aged 25-34 years, spend the greatest amount of time in sedentary behaviour compared to any other age group.

"This study is the first time that the link between modern screen-based sedentary behaviours, such as using a tablet or smartphone, and anxiety risk for mothers with young children has been investigated," said Dr Teychenne.

For the study 528 Australian mothers with children aged 2-5 years completed a survey, where they indicated how much time they spent using screens (TV, computer and devices such as tablets and smartphones) for leisure purposes as well as being screened for heightened anxiety symptoms.

Dr Teychenne said the results showed that for every hour they used a computer or handheld device, their anxiety levels increased. However the study found no association between TV viewing and anxiety symptoms.

The study also showed that no matter how much physical activity the mothers did, if they also spent long periods of their leisure time on their computer or handheld device, they were still at a higher risk of anxiety.

Dr Teychenne said the information from the study can now help researchers better understand alternative strategies that may help reduce risk of anxiety for mothers with young children.

"We know that a lot of mothers with young children are incredibly busy looking after their children, however, if they tend to spend long periods of leisure time on their computer, smartphone or tablet, they may actually be increasing their risk of developing anxiety.

"Given that a lack of time can be a huge barrier to these mums being more active, a more feasible approach may be to instead try to reduce their sedentary behaviour," she said.

Dr Teychenne said there are simple strategies that time-poor mums can implement in to their day that may benefit the whole family.

"Mums could try a "digital detox" by limiting the time they spend on social media, or browsing the web at night and make this a challenge they set with friends. They could also try taking short breaks from the screen by standing up every 20-30 minutes and going for a walk to get a glass of water, or even just to stretch.

“Reducing the time that mothers with young children spend using computers and handheld electronic devices for leisure purposes may be an important and cost effective strategy to lower the risk of anxiety in this high-risk target group,” she said.

Link to the journal: <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0155696>

IPAN’s work in physical activity and nutrition is leading the world globally in numerous areas including research into disadvantaged communities, children’s health and healthy ageing.

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