

**National Center on Sexual Exploitation**<http://endsexualexploitation.org>**Research Summary: Effects of Porn Use**

Compiled October 2017

**On Your Brain:**

- **The Research Is In:** Since 2011, there have been 26 major studies which reveal pornography use has negative and detrimental impacts on the brain.[i]
- **Shrinks Brain:** A 2014 study of the brain scans of 64 pornography users found that increased pornography use (i.e. pornography dosage) is linked to decreased brain matter in the areas of the brain associated with motivation and decision-making, and contributed to impaired impulse control and desensitization to sexual reward.[ii] Thus the study demonstrated that pornography use can produce physical, anatomic change in the brain—a hallmark of addiction.[iii]
- **Hijacks the Brain’s Reward System:** Motivation and reward are regulated by the mesolimbic system. There is ample evidence that the mesolimbic system is activated in response to both substance abuse and natural rewards such as sex.[iv] Addiction occurs when the pleasure/rewards pathways of the brain are hijacked by drugs such as cocaine or by natural process vital to survival such as eating and sex.[v] The constant novelty of Internet pornography, as well as properties such as violation of expectations, anticipation of reward, and the act of seeking (i.e. surfing) stimulate mesolimbic dopamine activity.[vi] Growing evidence suggests that pornography use hijacks the brain’s reward system in the same way that drug use does.[vii]
- **The Addiction Gets Worse:** Using functional MRI, a 2015 study from Cambridge found that compulsive sexual behavior is characterized by novelty-seeking, conditioning, and habituation to sexual stimuli in males—meaning users need more extreme content over time in order achieve the same level of arousal. The study also identified a dissociation between desiring or wanting but not liking sexually explicit materials—a finding consistent with theories of incentive motivation underlying drug addiction.[viii]

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## On Relationships:

### Adult (>18 years old) exposure to pornographic media is connected with:

1. Greater acceptance of sex before marriage
2. Having more sex partners
3. Rating their partners as less attractive
4. Being less satisfied with their partners sexual performance
5. Greater desire for sex without emotional involvement
6. More sex callousness
7. Trying to get partners to act out scenes from pornographic films
8. Increasing their estimates of how often people engage in sex with animals
9. Increasing their estimates of how often people engage in sex with violence
10. Increasing their estimates of how often people engage in sex in groups
11. Going to prostitutes
12. Greater acceptance of sex outside of marriage for married individuals
13. More likely to have an affair
14. Using more sexual terms to describe women
15. Reduced support for the women’s liberation movement
16. Less child centeredness during marriage
17. Reduced desire for female children
18. Believing that you don’t need to restrict pornography from children
19. More alcohol use
20. More binge drinking
21. Engaging in more behavioral aggression
22. Engaging in marital rape

## On Adolescents and Children:

### Impact of pornography on adolescents:

- **Harm to Young Brains:** A survey of 813 U.S. teens and young adults (13–25), found that 26% of adolescents aged 13–17 actively seek out pornography weekly or more often.[i] Research has demonstrated that children are more susceptible than adults to addictions and to developmental effects on the brain.[ii]
- **Emotional Bond with Caregivers:** A nationally representative survey of youth ages 9–17 reported that online pornography users were significantly more likely to report a poor emotional bond with their caregiver, than adolescents who viewed pornography offline or not at all.[iii]
- **Women as Sex Objects:** Internet pornography is shown to normalize the notion that women are sex objects among both adolescent boys and girls.[iv]
- **Sexual Uncertainty and Casual Sexual Exploration:** More frequent use of sexually explicit Internet material is shown to foster greater sexual uncertainty in the formation of sexual beliefs and values, as well as a shift away from sexual permissiveness with affection to attitudes supportive of uncommitted sexual exploration.[v]

- **Sending Sexually Explicit Images (sexting):** A survey of 4,564 adolescents aged 14–17 in five European countries, found that viewing Internet pornography is significantly associated with an increased probability of having sent sexual images and messages (sexting) among boys.[vi] A survey of 617 college freshman found that 30% of participants sent nude pictures at some time during high school; 45% had received nude pictures on their cell phones. The most important motivation for sexting was coercion such as blackmail or threats. About half of all sexting may be coercive.[vii]
- **Risky Sexual Behaviors:** Internet pornography use is linked to increases in problematic sexual activity at younger ages, and a greater likelihood of engaging risky sexual behavior, such as hookups, multiple sex partners, anal sex, group sex, and using substances during sex as young adolescents.[viii] A recent UK survey found that 44% of males aged 11–16 who viewed pornography reported that online pornography gave them ideas about the type of sex they wanted to try out.[ix]
- **Physical and Sexual Victimization:** A nationally representative survey of pornography use among youth aged 9–17, found that those with increased exposure to Internet pornography were significantly more likely to report physical and sexual victimization.[x]
- **Associated with Adolescent Delinquency and Criminal Behavior:** In a meta-analysis of eight studies, male adolescent sex offenders reported more exposure to sex or pornography than non-sex offenders.[xi] A study of sexually reactive children and adolescents (SRCAs) found that those who used pornography compared to those who did not use pornography were more likely to engage in a prominent pattern of lying, a persistent pattern of theft/stealing, to be truant, to frequently con/manipulate others, to engage in arson/fire setting behaviors, to engage in coerced vaginal penetration and forced sexual acts such as oral or digital penetration, to express sexually aggressive remarks (obscenities), and to engage in sex with animals.[xii] Other research also demonstrates an association between pornography consumption and adolescent delinquent behavior.[xiii]
- **Higher Usage Rates:** Research has found that among males the younger their age of first exposure to pornography, the higher their current consumption of pornography, as well as their greater integration of pornography into sexual activity, and less enjoyment of partnered sex.[xiv]
- **Future Use of Deviant Pornography:** A 2013 survey of a general population of Internet pornography users revealed that those who intentionally sought pornography at a younger age were significantly more likely to be users of pornography exhibiting the sexual abuse of animals and children.[xv]

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## On Women

- **Negative Body Image and Pressure to Perform Pornographic Acts:** As a result of viewing pornography, women reported lowered body image, criticism from their partners regarding their bodies, increased pressure to perform acts seen in pornographic films, and less actual sex. Men reported being more critical of their partner’s body and less interested in actual sex. [i]
- **Acceptance of Rape Myths:** Women who were exposed to pornography as children were more likely to accept rape myths and to have sexual fantasies that involved rape. [ii]

- **Domestic Violence & Sexual Abuse:** The use of pornography by batterers significantly increased a battered woman's odds of being sexually abused. Pornography use alone increased the odds by a factor of almost 2, and the combination of pornography and alcohol increased the odds of sexual abuse by a factor of 3.[iii] Other research has found that pornography use by batterers is associated with learning about sex through pornography, imitation of behaviors seen in pornography, comparison of women to pornography performers, introduction of other sexual partners, filming sexual acts without consent, and the broader culture of pornography (e.g. fetishes).[iv]
- **Increased Marital Rape:** Males who use pornography and go to strip clubs were found to engage in more sexual abuse, stalking, and marital rape than abusers who do not use pornography and go to strip clubs.[v]

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## On Men:

- **Lower Sexual Satisfaction and Sexual Dysfunction:** A 2015 study of online sexual activities among males found 20.3% reported that "one motive for their porn use was to maintain arousal with their partner." It also found that pornography use was linked to higher sexual desire, but lower overall sexual satisfaction, and lower erectile function.[i] Other research has correlated pornography use with "negative effects on partnered sex, decreased enjoyment of sexual intimacy, less sexual and relationship satisfaction." [ii]
- **Negative Body Image:** A 2015 study found that men's frequency of pornography use is positively linked to body image insecurity regarding muscularity and body fat, and to increased anxiety in romantic relationships.[iii]
- **Pornography Induced Erectile Dysfunction (PIED):** Historically, ED has been viewed as an age-dependent problem, with rates in men ages 18–59 as low as 2–5%.[iv] In the early 2000s, the Global Study of Sexual Attitudes and Behavior (GSSAB) reported that the ED rate among men aged 40–80 was approximately 13%.[v] In 2011, among males aged 18–40 the GSSAB found ED rates of 14–28%.[vi] This dramatic increase in ED rates among young men coincides with the sharp increase in the availability and accessibility of Internet pornography tube sites.[vii]
  - A 2-year longitudinal study of sexually active young males aged 16–21 published in 2016, found that over several checkpoints during the 2 years, they reported:
    - low sexual satisfaction (47.9%)
    - low desire (46.2%)
    - problems in erectile function (45.3%)[viii]

- Another study reported that one in four patients seeking medical help for new onset ED were under 40, with severe ED rates being 10% higher than those in men over 40.[ix]
- A study on men (mean age 36) seeking help for excessive sexual behavior—frequent use of pornography and masturbation—found that ED combined with low desire for partnered sex is a common observation in clinical practice.[x]
- A study examining subgroups of men struggling with sexual compulsivity, found that among those who reported seven or more hours of pornography viewing (or seven episodes of masturbation) per week, 71% reported sexual dysfunctions, and 33% reported delayed ejaculation.[xi]
- A Cambridge University study that was evenly divided between men with compulsive sexual behavior and those without, found that 84% of those with CSB experienced diminished libido or erectile function in physical relationships with women.[xii]
- **Correlated to Male Sexual Objectification of Women and Attitudes Supporting Violence Against Women:** Among collegiate men, frequency of exposure to men’s lifestyle magazines, reality TV programs that objectify women, and pornography, predicted more objectified cognitions about women and stronger attitudes supportive of violence against women. [xiii]
- **Risky Behaviors and Other Harms:** For males, increased pornography use is correlated with more sex partners, more alcohol use, more binge drinking, greater acceptance of sex outside of marriage for married individuals, greater acceptance of sex before marriage, and less child centeredness during marriage.[xiv]
- **Pornography as Sex Ed:** A study of male high school seniors in Sweden found that nearly 70% of those who frequently used pornography reported that pornography made them want to try out what they had seen compared to 42% of boys in a reference group.[xv] Frequent users of pornography viewed all forms of pornography more often, especially advanced or more deviant forms of pornography including violence and sexual abuse of children and animals.[xvi]
- **Sexual Harassment and Coercion:** A study of 804 Italian males and females aged 14 to 19, found that males who viewed pornography were significantly more likely to report having sexually harassed a peer or forcing someone to have sex.[xvii]

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