



A teen perspective: health messages and social media

Poll report

Poll 38, August 2025



Report highlights

- Two thirds (63%) of teens get health information from social media, with the leading topics being fitness and diet.
- The majority of teens (77%) and their parents (79%) say it is hard to tell what is true and untrue on social media.
- Many teens make health decisions based on social media content, with over a third (42%) having tried or considered trying something new after seeing it on social media.
- More than a third (41%) of teens say social media makes them wish their body was different.

Social media

Social media is defined as websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or participate in social networking. Some examples of social media are TikTok, Snapchat and Facebook.

Sources of health information for teens

When teens, defined as children aged 12 to 17 years, were asked what sources of health information they have seen or heard *in the past month*, the leading sources were parents (65%), friends (53%), social media (52%), school (43%), and websites or apps (30%) (see *Figure 1*). Only 16% of teens report getting health information from a health professional in the past month, suggesting that most teens do not have regular contact with health professionals.

More teens from lower socio-economic circumstances (72% of those in lowest SEIFA quintile) cited parents as a recent source compared to those from higher socio-economic circumstances (60% of those in highest SEIFA quintile).²

There was also an association between age and recent sources of health information. Slightly more younger

teens report parents as a source of health information compared to older teens (71% of 12 year olds vs 62% of 17 year olds). More older teens including almost two thirds (63%) of respondents aged 17 years, saw health information on social media in the past month compared to just over one third (38%) of 12 year olds. Slightly more female (55%) than male (48%) teens report having seen health content on social media.

Teens were asked where they would go if they were looking for health information, with just 27% saying they would go to social media. Most teens (70%) would go to their parents followed by friends (41%), websites or apps (40%), and doctor/nurse/health professionals (29%).

Social media use

Almost all (90%) young people aged 12 to 17 years use social media, with two thirds (68%) using it at least once every day and just over half (54%) using it multiple times a day. Social media use increases with age with almost twice as many 17 year olds (88%) as 12 year olds (45%) using it at least once every day. Only 3% of 17 year olds report never using social media compared to 19% of 12 year olds. Using social media at least once a day is common among both females and males with a higher proportion of females (59%) than males (48%) checking it multiple times a day.

Three quarters of teens (77%), say they find it hard to know what is true and untrue on social media. The prevalence of this difficulty was relatively consistent for teens of all ages and reported by slightly more female

Sources of health information in the past month

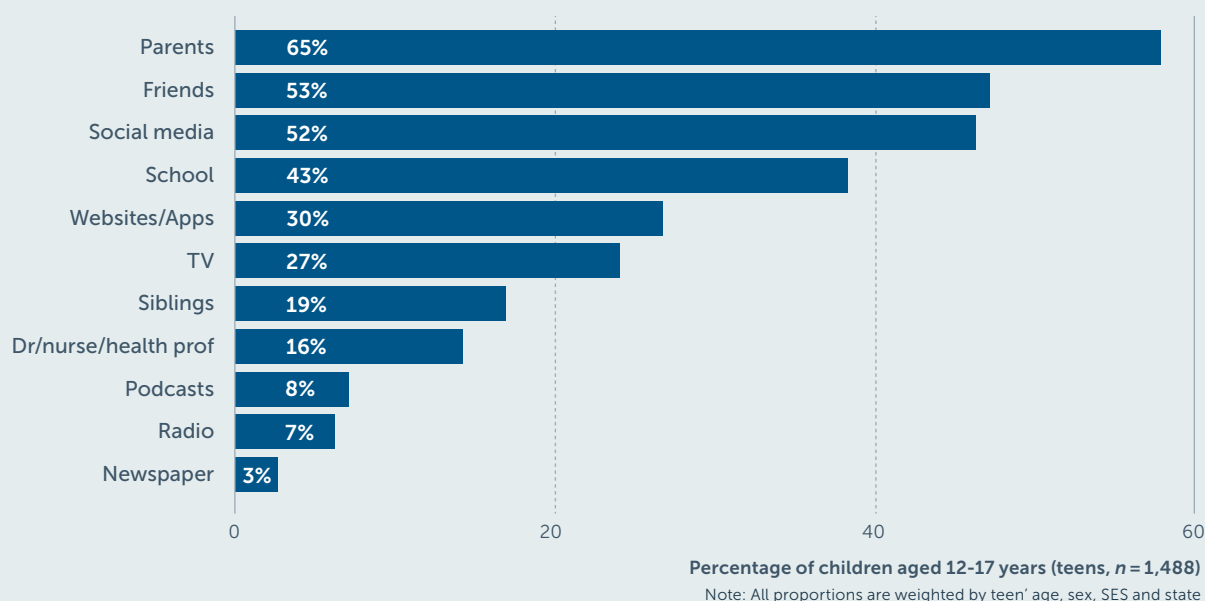


Figure 1.

teens (80%) than male teens (74%). A majority of parents (79%) recognised that it was difficult for their teens to know what is true and untrue. A similar proportion of parents recognised this difficulty when considering most demographic groups, with slightly higher awareness among university-educated parents (81%) compared to those with a Year 12 education or less (75%).

Misinformation

Misinformation is any false information that is spread, regardless of intent to mislead the audience. Disinformation is knowingly spreading false information to deceive or harm the audience.¹

Social media access

One third (36%) of teens report that they have at least one social media account that their parents do not know about. Current regulations state that children must be at least 13 years old to have a social media account. However, four of five 12 year olds (81%) report using social media and 36% say they have a social media account their parents do not know about.

The Australian government will introduce a new age restriction in December 2025³, to prevent children under 16 years of age accessing certain social media platforms (YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Facebook, X, and Reddit). The majority of teens (85%) and parents (86%) say that children under 16 years of age will still find ways to access social media once the new regulation is introduced.

Health information on social media

Nearly two-thirds of teens (63%) say they get health information from social media. This is more common among female teens (70%) than male teens (56%), and among older teens—67% of 17 year olds—compared to 54% of 12 year olds. These findings suggest that teens are exposed to health information on social media even if they're not actively seeking it, as only 27% say they would turn to social media when intentionally looking for health information (as described above).

Health topics seen by teens on social media

Teens who use social media were asked what health and wellbeing topics they had seen content about in the past month (see *Figure 2*). The most common content viewed was about exercise and fitness (79%), nutrition

Type of health information seen on social media in past month

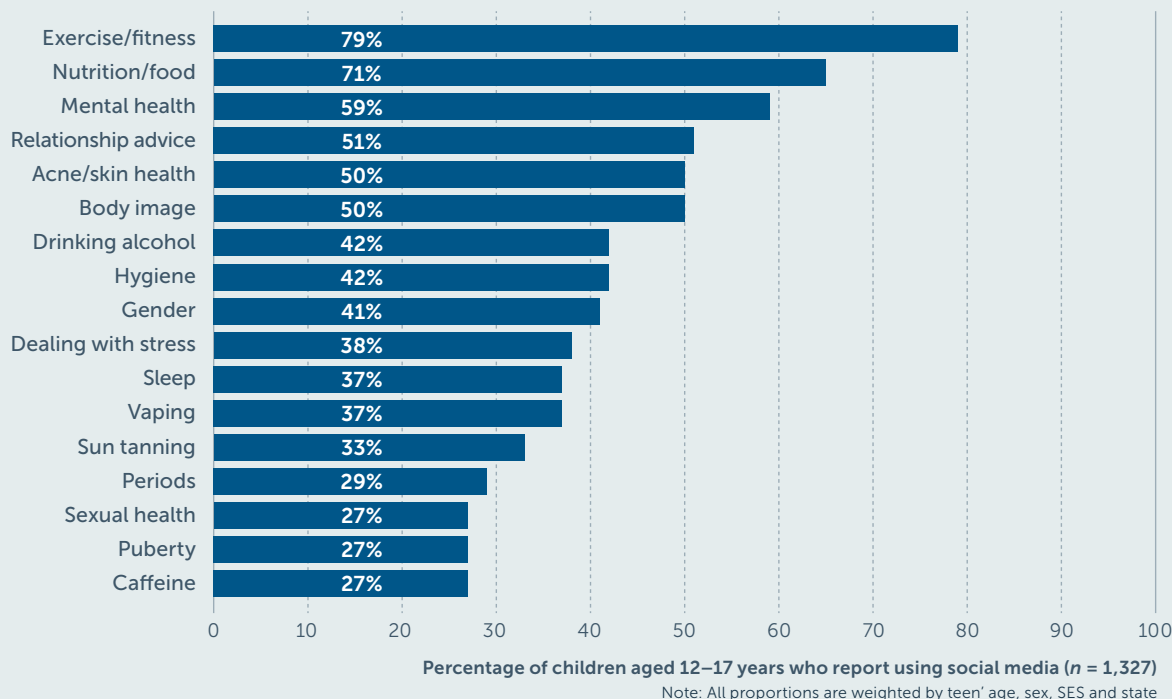


Figure 2.

and food (71%), mental health (59%), acne and skin health (50%) and body image (50%). Other commonly seen content included alcohol (42%) and sleep (37%). Teens across all demographic groups reported seeing these topics, with more females than males reporting body image content (57% vs 42%) relationship advice (59% vs 43%), sexual health (31% vs 23%), and sleep (40% vs 33%).

Two in five teens (42%) say they've tried or considered trying something new after seeing health content on social media. This was more common among females (47%) than males (37%), and among teens from higher socio-economic backgrounds—47% in the highest SEIFA quintile compared to 36% in the lowest.²

Social media and teen body image

Two in five teens (41%) say they wish their body looked different because of time spent on social media, and a similar proportion of parents (44%) say this is true for their teen. This feeling is most common among younger teens—46% of 12 and 13 year olds—compared to 38% of 16 and 17 year olds. It's also slightly more common among females (45%) than males (38%).

Among the 54% of teens who say they spend more time on social media than they'd like, over half (54%) report that it makes them wish their body looked different. In contrast, only 26% of teens who are satisfied with the amount of time they spend on social media feel the same way. Since this was a cross-sectional survey, these findings show associations only, rather than cause and effect.

Implications

Adolescence is a time of significant growth and development, both physically and mentally, meaning teenagers frequently have questions and concerns about their health. We are in an age where online information is abundant, yet it is harder than ever to discern what is true and untrue. This study shows that the vast majority of young people use social media frequently. They are exposed to a wide range of health information despite not necessarily actively seeking it, with concerning self-reported impacts on mental health and body image. Conversely few young people are regularly in contact with health care professionals who can be regarded as a trusted source of health information.

Most parents and teens find it difficult to know what is true and untrue on social media, indicating that they may be aware that it can be a source of misinformation. Nonetheless teens regularly see health information and advice on a wide range of topics and somewhat concerning nearly half try something new as a result.

A new government restriction to be implemented in December 2025 aims to prevent children under 16 from accessing certain social media platforms, with mental health concerns and online safety highlighted as primary reasons for introducing the restriction.³ While details of the implementation are still evolving, this study suggests that parents and teens believe young people are likely to continue using social media by finding ways around the age verification or moving to other platforms that are not included in the current bill.⁴ Accountability must be placed on social media platforms to make social media safer for children and teens, and parents and caregivers need to be properly equipped to help their children navigate this space. In the constantly changing digital space, it is critical that parents and children are empowered with digital and health literacy skills to spot potentially harmful misinformation and find credible information.

Reassuringly, despite reports of many teens consuming health content on social media, when they actively need to obtain health information they report parents as their number one source. The digital space may feel overwhelming and ever present, but it is important to remember that parents remain the most frequently accessed source of advice and support for their adolescent children. Parents should be empowered and encouraged to talk regularly with their teens about their health and wellbeing and any content they are consuming online. Further, support and education are needed to equip both parents and young people with the digital and scientific literacy required to safely navigate the rapidly expanding landscape of misinformation and disinformation online about health and wellbeing. Programs that encourage and teach young people and their parents how to evaluate sources, question claims, and identify bias or manipulation need to be made widely available. To demonstrate how misleading some social media content can be, young people and their parents can be shown examples of common misinformation tactics such as emotional language, fake experts and cherry-picked data. Schools, parents, and health professionals should collaborate to empower young people with the skills needed to confidently navigate the digital health landscape and access evidence-based information from trustworthy sources.

Data source and methods



This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by the Online Research Unit for The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. The survey was administered from 20 to 28 May 2025 to a randomly selected nationally representative sample of Australian parents aged 18 years or older by age, sex and state of residence. All parents had at least one child aged 12 to 17 years of age who was also invited to participate in the survey.

The survey comprised two questionnaires—one completed by a parent or caregiver, and the other by their child aged 12 to 17 years. For parents with more than one child in the target population, one child was randomly selected to participate. Both parents and children responded to close-ended questions assessing their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours in relation to health information and social media use among adolescents. The response rate among eligible parents was 91%, with 2,012 completing the parent questionnaire. Of these, 1,488 (74%) provided consent for their child aged 12–17 years to participate. All 1,488 children whose parents consented agreed to participate and completed the child questionnaire, resulting in 1,488 parent–child dyads. The estimates presented in this report are based on these 1,488 children and the 2012 parents who completed their respective questionnaires. The data have been weighted to reflect the demographic distribution of the Australian population, using figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

References



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