



MEDIBANK HEALTH CHECK

Is it time to unplug?
Community views on
the health impact of
screen time

GIVING THE COMMUNITY A VOICE
ON IMPORTANT HEALTH ISSUES

ALL PART OF GENERATION BETTER

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For Better Health

ABOUT THE MEDIBANK HEALTH CHECK



This survey is the first in a regular series of ‘Medibank Health Checks’ which will examine community views of emerging health issues.

These are typically issues where Australian households have noticed some health or wellbeing impacts and where personal action or involvement of the health services sector may be required. The Medibank Health Check aims to inform debate around such issues and unpack what may be required to take action to address emerging health concerns.

Each quarter we will release a new survey on an emerging health topic. We chose screen time for our first Medibank Health Check because it is something of a modern day dilemma – how much time should we and our children spend on screens and what are the health implications?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The question that this Medibank Health Check seeks to address is whether it is time to unplug from the many screens – such as TV's, tablets, smartphones, or computers – which are now a dominant feature of Australian households.

The key findings from our representative survey of the Australian community are:

- ↪ People spend a lot of time on screens: respondents estimate they spend an average of 6 hours a day in front of screens excluding work and study time and a further 3 hours at work.
- ↪ There are high levels of uncertainty around the health risks with over-use of screens, in particular around attention difficulties, healthy eating, self-esteem, behaviour or conduct problems, hyperactivity, depression and anxiety.
- ↪ Parents are quite anxious about the time children spend in front of screens. They hold stronger views about the impact of screen time but are only marginally wiser about the health impacts of screen time.

The clear conclusion we draw from this Medibank Health Check is that people suspect there is something wrong with the amount of time they spend in front of screens but they are uncertain about exactly what this is: the exact nature of the health impact still remains elusive.

Medibank believes that there is a clear call to action arising from these survey results. The first is that greater community education is needed around what is a safe level of screen time. The second is the need for programs which encourage people to unplug and participate in recreational alternatives. There appears to be a strong community need for such initiatives.

The clear conclusion we draw from this Medibank Health Check is that people suspect there is something wrong with the amount of time they spend in front of screens.

INTRODUCTION

Long gone are the days where the only screen that would occupy our time is the TV. Today our homes are packed with screens be it a TV, a tablet, computer or smartphone. Travel on any form of public transport and you will encounter many people interacting with a screen.

This Medibank Health Check explores the prevalence of screen use, how people feel about it, and the level of knowledge about the health impacts of too much screen time. We have also taken a look at how families with children view the challenges of screen time.

In a representative sample of 1,505 people across Australia, this Medibank Health Check asks five critical questions:

- 1** How many screens do you have in your household?
- 2** How much time do you spend on these screens during the average day?
- 3** How do you feel about the time you spend on screens?
- 4** How much do you know about the health consequences of screen time?
- 5** What would you be doing if you spent less time on screens?

We chose this topic for our first Medibank Health Check because with the increasing number of screens in schools, homes and workplaces, screen time issues are being increasingly debated: how much is too much and what harm will too much actually do?

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Studies have linked screen time to a range of health issues, including obesity, attention difficulty, low self-esteem, depression, and decreased social interaction skills.

Research from across the world shows time spent using screens is on the rise. A recent Australian study¹ showed that more than one-third of online Australians own connected devices that did not exist 10 years ago, and that 82 per cent of Australians spend almost one whole day per week online.

Research into the health impacts of screen time has most often focused on children with calls for guidelines for maximum daily limits on screen time. A recent UK study² of pre-school children released in March this year found poorer wellbeing rising with each additional hour of screen time along with the increased risk of emotional problems and poorer family functioning.

A further recent UK report³ stated that increased screen time and exposure to media (such as bedroom TVs) is consistently associated with reduced feelings of social acceptance, and increased feelings of loneliness, conduct problems and aggression in children. According to the report,

children who spend more time on computers, watching TV and playing video games tend to experience higher levels of emotional distress, anxiety and depression.

Evidence also suggests a 'dose-response' relationship, where each additional hour of viewing increases children's likelihood of experiencing socio-emotional problems and the risk of lower self-esteem.

The physical health issues associated with too much screen time have also been documented. In 2012, a South Australian study⁴ found that screen time had overtaken exercise as the most important factor in childhood obesity. The study looked at 2200 children aged between 9 and 16 years and found the length of time they spent in front of television and computer screens was a more likely indicator of being overweight or obese than the amount of exercise they did.

In Australia guidelines recommend that 5 to 18 year olds accumulate no more than 2 hours of screen time a day for entertainment. It is recommended children aged 2 to 5 spend less than 1 hour a day and those under 2 do not spend any time in front of screens.⁵

About the Survey - Methodology

The Medibank Health Check is a representative survey of 1505 respondents across all Australian states and territories. This survey was conducted online on 4th – 6th March 2014. The sample was proportionally spread by State, gender, age, income and household status. A full list of questions from the survey can be found at the end of this report.

¹The Nielsen Australian Connected Consumers Report, November 2013. • ²JAMA Paediatrics, Electronic media and child health, March 3 to 17, 2014.

³Public Health England: How healthy behaviour supports children's wellbeing, August 2013.

⁴Maier, Olds, Eisenmann and Dollman (2012): Screen time is more strongly associated than physical activity with overweight and obesity in 9- to 16- year-old Australians, Acta paediatrica Vol 101 (II)

⁵Department of Health website, Commonwealth of Australia

SCREEN USAGE IS HIGH BUT NOT FOR ALL

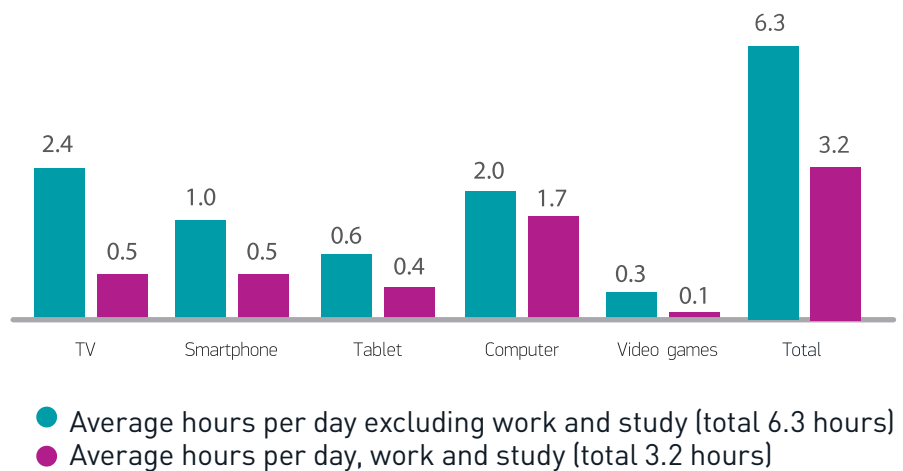
The first part of this Medibank Health Check looks at the amount of time people spend in front of screens and some of the influences on this.

Respondents were asked to identify how much time they spend on different screens in half hour and hour brackets. These responses were then averaged to gain an approximation of time spent on screens.

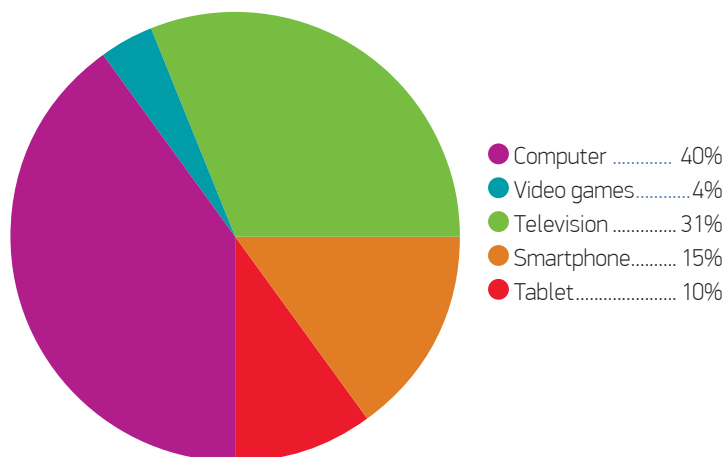
The survey results show that during an average day people estimate they spend just over 6 hours in front of screens excluding work and study time. When work and study time are added, estimated average daily screen usage increases to 9 hours. About 40% of this time is in front of computers with TV at 31% taking the next biggest share.

The average figures however hide a critical feature of screen usage: 30% of respondents identified that they spend no time in front of screens outside of work and study. This figure may be overstated as this survey was in fact conducted online. Indeed later questions in this survey do point to a level of denial when it comes to time spent on screens and health impacts.

Average Hours of Screen Use



Screen Use – Daily Breakdown (Including Work and Study, Total 9.5 Hours)



SCREEN USE IS HIGH BUT NOT FOR ALL

Time Spent on Screens (Work and Study)

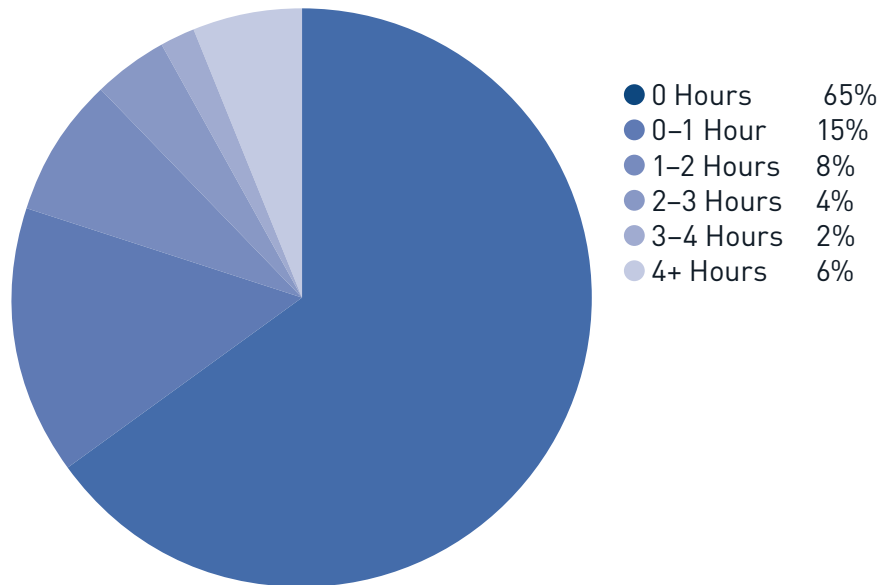
In terms of work and study, almost two-thirds of respondents spend no hours in front of screens: over-use of screens does not appear to be a uniform problem across the community.

Time in front of screens appears to be mostly related to age. In general terms the older you are the less time you spend in front of TVs and smartphones, and to a lesser extent tablets. Further, the older you are the more likely you are to record zero hours in front of a screen. The opposite is generally true for computers. Interestingly, the older you are the more time you tend to spend in front of computers.

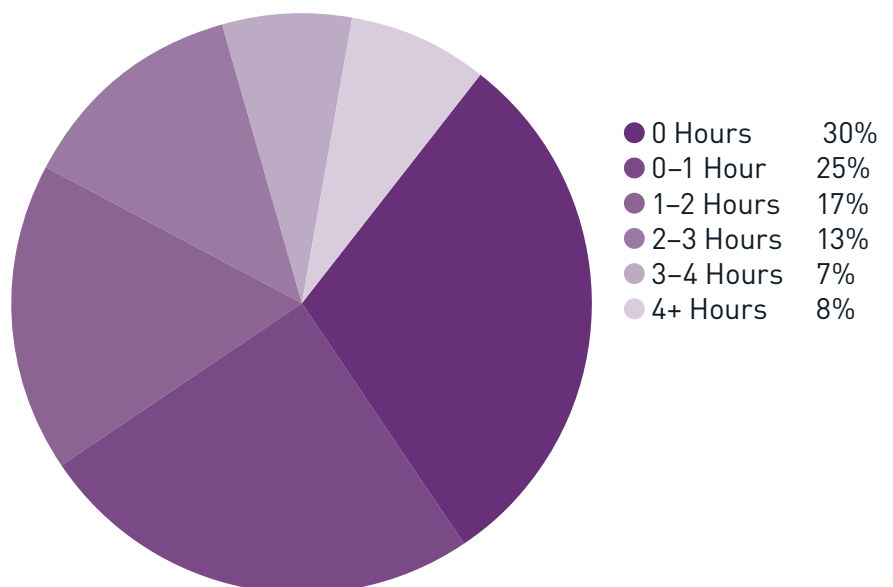
There is little difference in screen use across states and only minor differences between rural vs metro locations.

Income plays a role in the number of screens which are in a household – the wealthier the household the more screens which are available. However the amount of time spent in front of screens does not vary significantly by income. This suggests that a threshold of use is reached which is not dependent on the number of screens available.

Later in this report we specifically examine screen time usage on households with children.

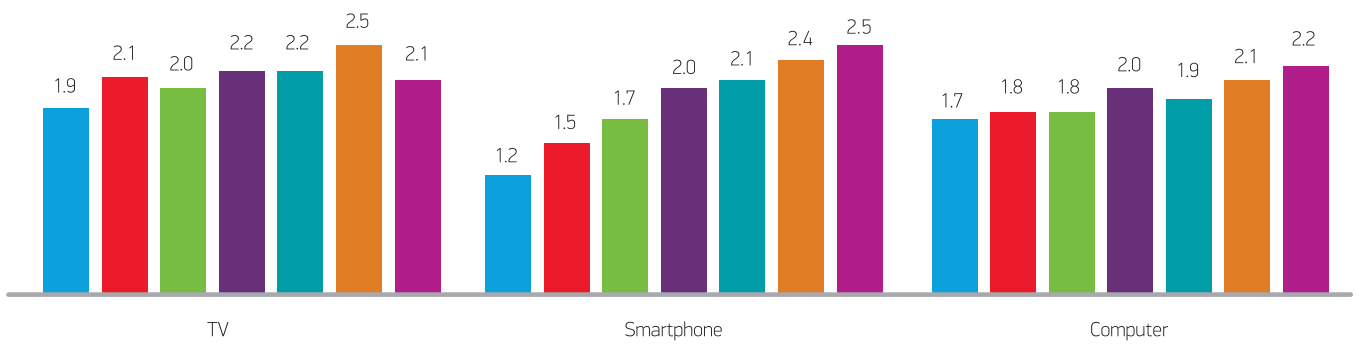


Time Spent on Screens (excluding work and study)

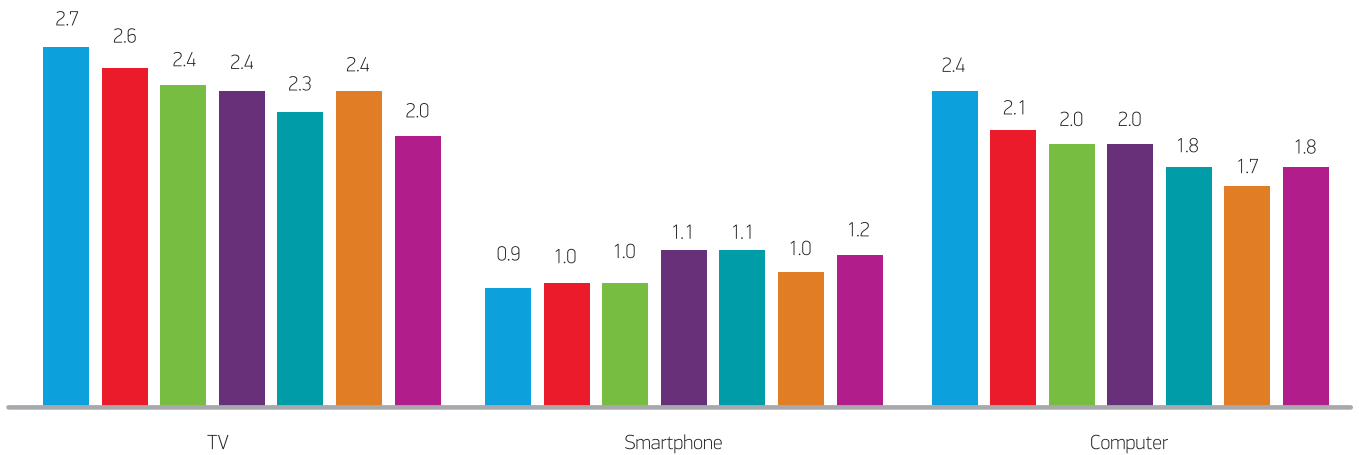


SCREEN USE IS HIGH BUT NOT FOR ALL

Average Number of Screens by Income Bracket



Average Hours on Screens by Income Bracket (Excluding Work and Study)



- Under \$40k
- \$40k – \$59k
- \$60k – \$79k
- \$80k – \$99k
- \$100k – \$119k
- \$120k – \$149k
- \$150k +

VIEWS ABOUT SCREEN TIME

Seventy per cent of respondents either strongly or slightly agreed with the statement that the amount of time they spend in front of a screen is about average.

Despite the prominent view that 'my use is average', 45% of respondents strongly or slightly agreed with the statement that they would like to cut back on screen time. Respondents also have high levels of concern about their use:

- 37% either strongly or slightly agree that they are concerned about the amount of time they spend on screens;
- 38% strongly or slightly agree that they feel guilty about the time they spend in front of screens;
- 41% strongly or slightly agree it affects family time.

In terms of health impacts, 32% strongly or slightly agree screen time affects their health, although 32% also strongly disagree with the statement – the highest 'strongly disagree' result in the survey.

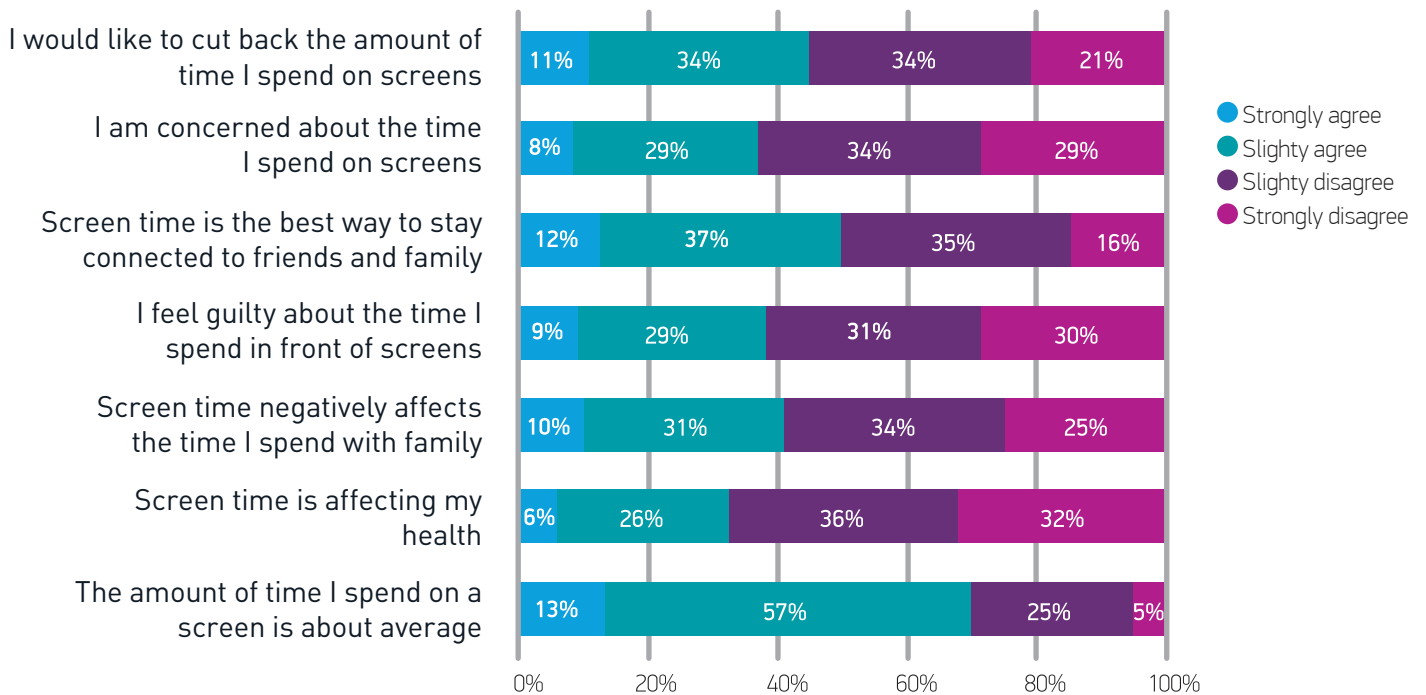
Another way to examine these views is to combine the 'slightly agree' and 'slightly disagree' results. This reflects people's uncertainty around the topic. A total of 82% answered slightly agree and slightly disagree on the question whether they were spending an average amount of time in front of screens. People simply do not know whether they are spending too much time in front of screens.

Respondents most frequently identified reading a book, going for a walk or spending time with family as the three things they would do if they spent less time in front of a screen. About 20% of respondents nominated exercise as what they would do instead of screen time.

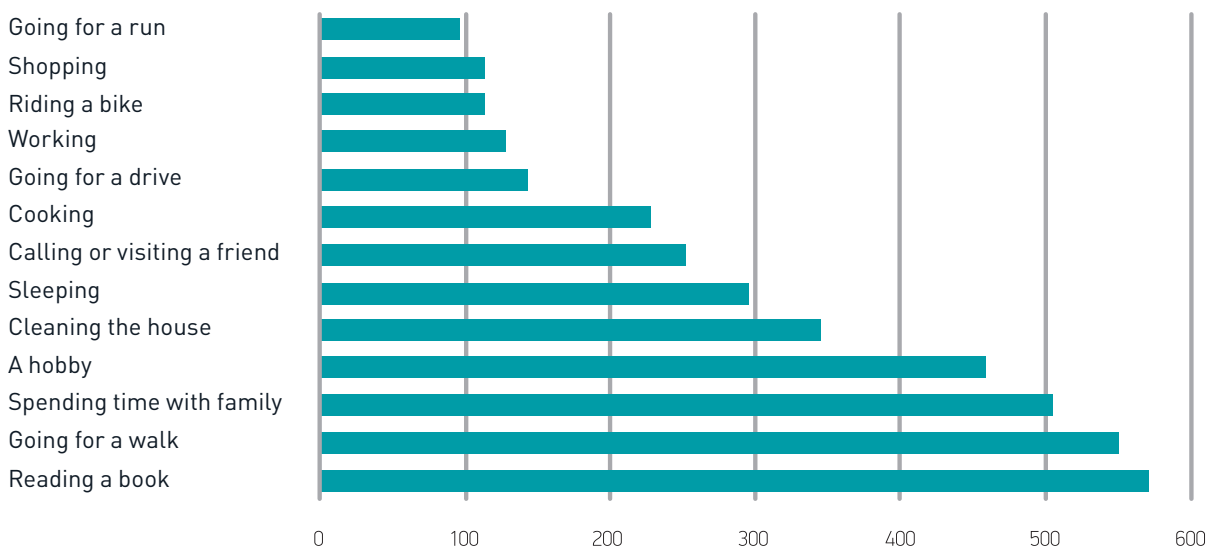
Respondents most frequently identified reading a book, going for a walk or spending time with family as the three things they would do if they spent less time in front of a screen.

VIEWS ABOUT SCREEN TIME

Views about screen time



What Would You Do Instead? (Three Responses Required)



THERE IS A POOR UNDERSTANDING OF HEALTH IMPACTS

The third part of this Medibank Health Check examines community understanding about health impacts.

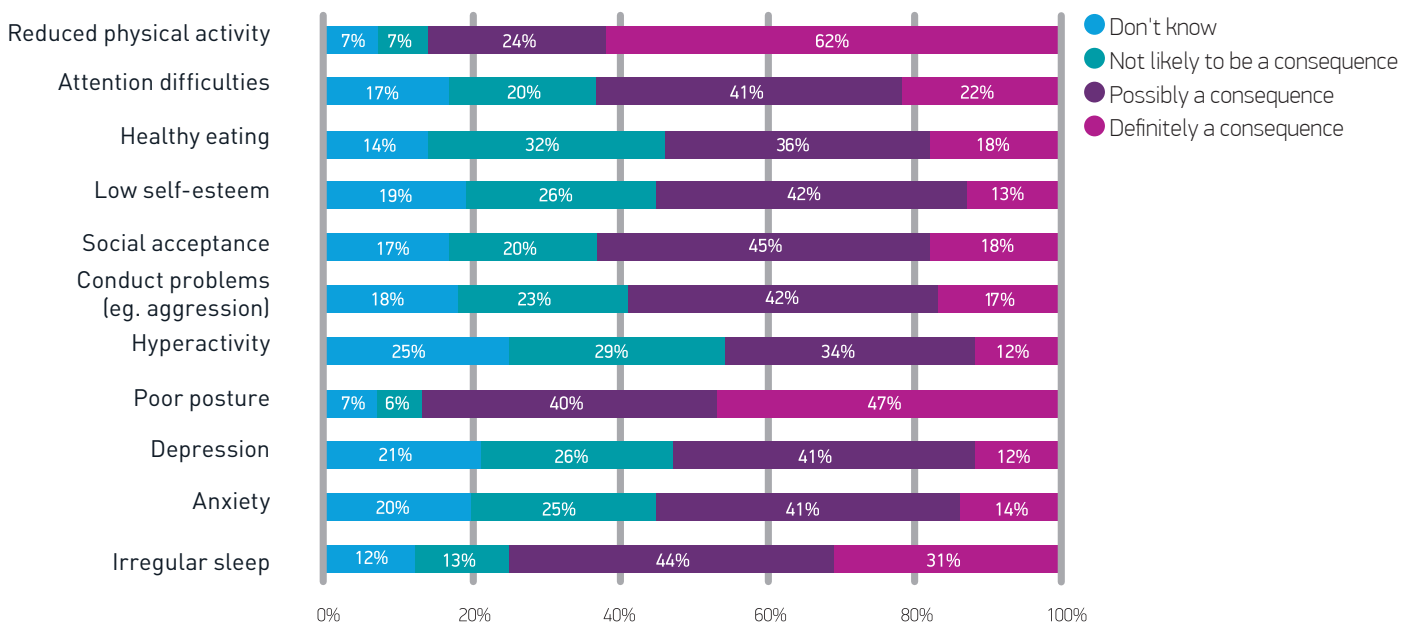
People are most certain about the impact of reduced physical activity from screen time (62% say this is definitely a consequence) followed by poor posture (47%) and irregular sleep (31%) as being definite impacts.

People do have some awareness that there are other possible consequences. However when

we combine responses to 'definitely a consequence' and 'possibly a consequence' – a generous way of looking at the understanding of health impacts – only between 50% to 60% of the respondents recognise the likelihood of known health impacts (attention difficulties, healthy eating, self-esteem, behaviour or conduct problems, hyperactivity, depression and anxiety).

Again another way to view survey responses in this section is to combine the 'not likely' or 'possibly a consequence' figures to reflect people's uncertainty around the topic. High levels of uncertainty exist across all health impact areas except poor posture and reduced physical activity.

Understanding of Health Impacts



A CLOSER LOOK AT HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN

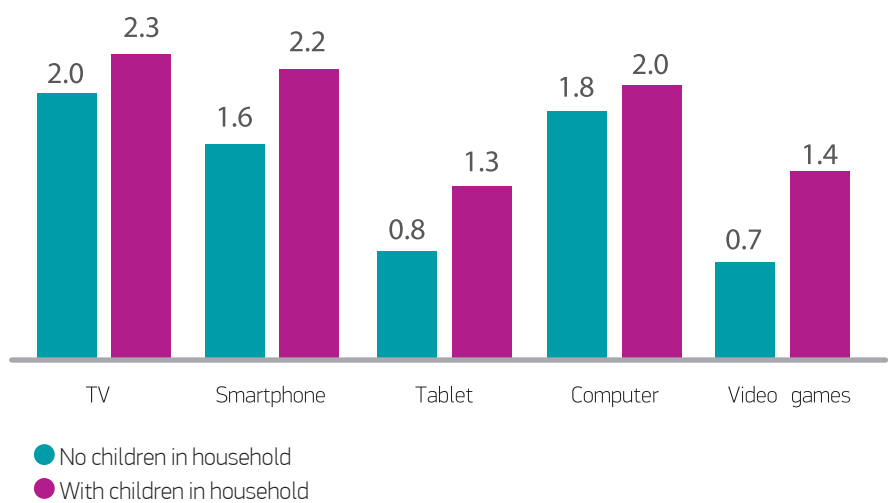
The survey results show households with children are likely to have more screens.

When it comes to health consequences, households with children are likely to hold stronger views around the impact of screen time. This is the most pronounced when it comes to the impact on family time, general concerns about time spent in front of screens, and general views on health impacts.

This is also the case with awareness of the possible health consequences of screen time. Households with children show more awareness around possible health impacts. This difference in awareness is however modest when compared to our survey results as a whole. This shows that even though parents are concerned about the amount of time in front of screens, they are little wiser about the actual impacts of screen time.

There is little difference across these views between families with infants, primary or secondary school children.

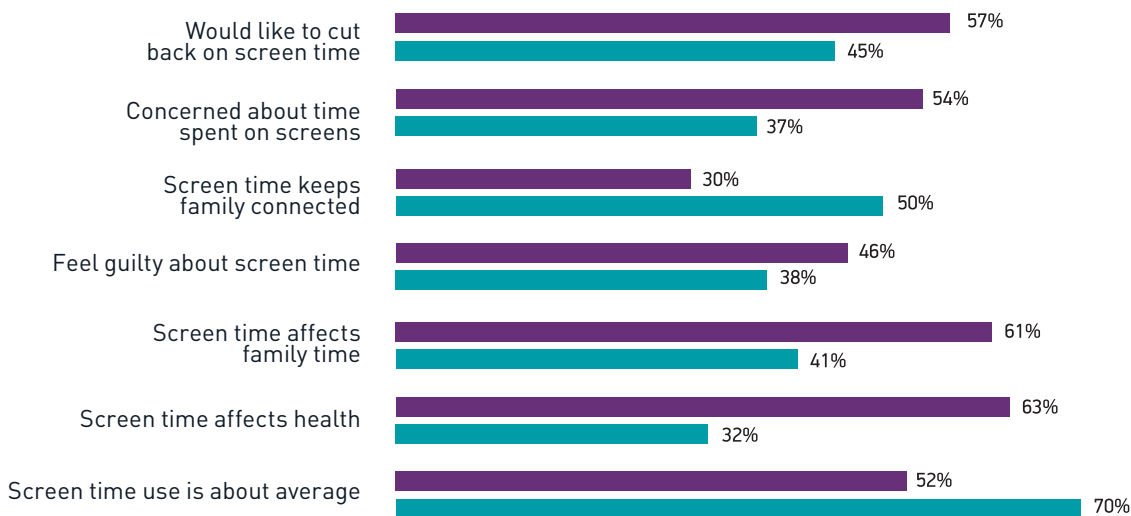
Average Number of Screens Per Household



A CLOSER LOOK AT HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN

- As it relates to households with children (n=525)
- As it relates to all respondents (n=1505)

Respondents Agreeing with Statement



Respondents Who Don't Know or Believe Health Consequences Are Not Likely



WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN?

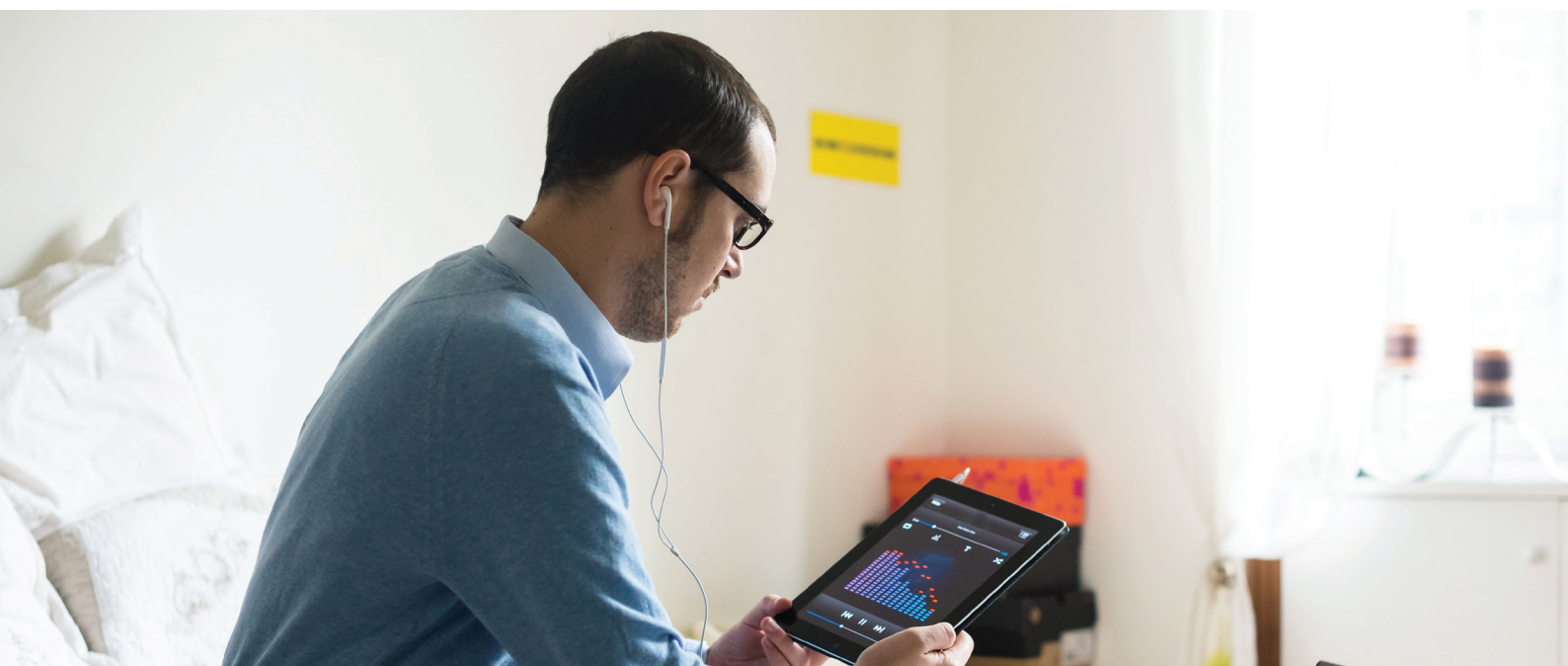
There is a clear conclusion which can be drawn from this Medibank Health Check: people suspect there is something wrong with the amount of time they spend in front of screens but they are uncertain about exactly what this is.

The suspicion that something is wrong with screen time is higher when it comes to households with children, but the exact nature of the impact still remains elusive. This is despite the fact that academic research into the health impacts of too much screen time is well advanced.

The fact that people perceive there is a problem provides an ideal platform for education and behaviour change around screen usage. Perception of a problem is the important first step; it is

a platform for getting people to take that next small step and unplug. At present there is an opportunity to change behaviour for the better. We say 'at present' because over time we can expect this perception of a problem to fade as people accept their current behaviour to be normal. As this survey finds, 70% of people consider, but are not certain, the time they spend in front of a screen is average.

Medibank believes that there is a clear call to action arising from these survey results. The first is that greater community education is needed around what is a safe level of screen time. The second is the need for programs which encourage people to unplug and participate in recreational alternatives. There appears to be a strong community need for such initiatives.



MEDIBANK HEALTH CHECK #1

QUESTIONNAIRE

Conducted by The Digital Edge for Medibank on 4th to 6th March 2014

1. How many of the following screens do you have in your household?
(Scale: none, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 or more)
 - TV
 - Mobile phone with internet / email access
 - Tablet (eg iPad)
 - Computer
 - Video games (eg playstation Xbox)
2. During an average day how many hours would you spend in front of the following screens excluding work or study related activity?
(Scale: 0 hours, 0 to 1/2hour, 1/2 to 1hr, 1 to 2hrs, 2 to 3hrs, 3 to 4hrs, 4 to 5hrs, 5hrs or more)
 - TV
 - Mobile phone with internet / email access
 - Tablet (eg iPad)
 - Computer
 - Video games (eg playstation Xbox)
3. During an average day how many hours would you spend in front of the following screens on work or study related activity?
(Scale: 0 hours, 0 to 1/2hour, 1/2 to 1hr, 1 to 2hrs, 2 to 3hrs, 3 to 4hrs, 4 to 5hrs, 5hrs or more)
 - TV
 - Mobile phone with internet / email access
 - Tablet (eg iPad)
 - Computer
 - Video games (eg playstation Xbox)
4. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
(Scale: strongly agree, slightly agree, slightly disagree, strongly disagree)
 - The amount of time I spend in front of a screen is about average
 - Screen time is affecting my health
 - Screen time negatively affects the time I spend with family
 - I feel guilty about the time I spend in front of screens
 - Screen time is the best way to stay connected to family and friends
 - I am concerned about the time I spend on screens
 - I would like to cut back the amount of time I spend on screens

MEDIBANK HEALTH CHECK #1

QUESTIONNAIRE

5. Thinking about children you know well or care for, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
(Scale N/A, strongly agree, slightly agree, slightly disagree, strongly disagree)
- The amount of time children spend in front of a screen is about average
 - Screen time affects children's health
 - Screen time negatively affects the time children spend with others
 - I feel guilty about the time my child / children spends in front of screens
 - Screen time is the best way to keep children connected with family and friends
 - I am concerned about the time my child / children spend on screens
 - I would like to cut back the amount of time my child / children spend on screens
6. How would you rate the likelihood of the following consequences of spending too much time in front of a screen?
(Scale: not likely to be a consequence, possibly a consequence, definitely a consequence, don't know)
- Irregular sleep
 - Anxiety
 - Depression
 - Poor posture
 - Hyperactivity
 - Conduct problems (eg. aggression)
 - Social acceptance
 - Self esteem
 - Healthy eating
 - Attention difficulties
 - Reduced physical activity
7. If you could cut down on screen time what would you like to be doing instead?
(please choose three from the list below)
- Reading a book
 - Going for a walk
 - Going for a run
 - Shopping
 - Calling or visiting a friend
 - Cleaning the house
 - Cooking
 - Sleeping
 - Working
 - A hobby
 - Riding a bike
 - Spending time with family
 - Going for drive
 - Other