

THE EDITOR'S CORNER

Surgeon General's Warning

The 1964 Surgeon General's warning marked the first official recognition by the U.S. government that smoking was a major cause of lung cancer. This landmark public health document sparked public awareness of the health risks associated with cigarettes, led to legislative changes such as increased regulation of tobacco products and the introduction of warning labels on cigarette packs, and launched nationwide campaigns to reduce smoking rates.

Last year, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy issued a similar warning regarding social media's impact on mental health, particularly in adolescents. The 2023 report, *Social Media and Youth Mental Health*,¹ outlined the risks associated with social media use and called for tech companies and policymakers to take greater responsibility for creating safer online environments.

The warning specifically emphasized the association between social media and anxiety and depression. It encouraged parents to limit their teenagers' screen time and social media use, and to teach their children healthier online habits. Serious concerns were also raised about online exposure to cyberbullying, misinformation, sexually explicit content, posts promoting unrealistic body image, and other harmful material.

In fact, increasing depression rates among adolescents correlate almost exactly with the rise of smartphones and social media, with a steady climb since 2005 and a particularly sharp spike around 2010. Experts highlight two pivotal years: 2007, when the introduction of the iPhone launched widespread smartphone adoption, and 2012, when smartphone ownership among teens became nearly ubiquitous, changing the way they communicate with one another.

For those interested in learning more about this topic, I highly recommend *The Anxious Generation* by Jonathan Haidt² and *Bad Therapy* by Abigail Shrier.³ Haidt raises concerns about the

impact of smartphones and social media on adolescent mental health, arguing that social media platforms like Instagram exacerbate feelings of inadequacy, especially in young girls. He recommends that parents delay giving their children smartphones until at least eighth grade—the “Wait Until Eighth” campaign—and limit social media access until age 16.

Shrier argues that adults have come to rely on smartphones to distract teens: “Nobody has made any serious effort to block teens’ smartphone use—not parents, not teachers, and definitely not mental health experts—because smartphones have become one more mental health accommodation we disburse to the young.”³ She urges restricting smartphones from schools and adding boxed warnings to social media. Her advice is straightforward: treat social media like cigarettes.

The 1964 and 2023 Surgeon General's warnings were important calls for awareness and responsibility. As orthodontists, we can do our part to combat digital overload by recognizing heightened anxiety in our adolescent patients and providing a supportive environment, while simultaneously helping them build resilience when facing minor discomfort during treatment. If you notice your teen patients struggling with depression, consider removing their braces early and encouraging them to put down their phones for a few hours. It doesn't take a medical expert to know that going offline can help a kid breathe a little easier.

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REFERENCES

1. Office of the Surgeon General: Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, D.C., 2023.
2. Haidt, J.: *The Anxious Generation*, Penguin Random House, New York, 2023.
3. Shrier, A.: *Bad Therapy: Why the Kids Aren't Growing Up*, Penguin Random House, New York, 2024.