Is computer addiction "real," like alcohol and nicotine addiction?

Video Gallery: Video Games
The Sony PlayStation PS3 was the hottest and most anticipated electronics launch in recent history. It sold out of most stores within hours of its November 2006 U.S. launch.

Some video games actually provide a workout for kids and can help reduce obesity. Learn about video game workouts in this video from ScienCentral.

Watch this video about the launch of Halo 3 in New York City with appearances by Bill Gates, Ludacris and Master Chief himself.
Recognizing Computer Addiction

Much of our understanding of computer addiction comes from decades of research on other addictions, like alcoholism or gambling addiction. Psychologists have identified several danger signs for computer addiction. Any of these signs would be a red flag, and multiple signs could mean there's a real problem.

- Staying on the computer for much longer than intended, or not noticing the passage of time while using the computer
- Making conscious efforts to cut back on computer time and repeatedly failing
- Thinking frequently about the computer when not using it or constantly looking forward to the next opportunity to use it
- Hiding the extent of computer use from family and friends
- Using the computer as an escape when feeling depressed or stressed
- Missing events or opportunities or failing at non-computer-related tasks because of time spent on the computer. This could include poor job performance or missing out on family activities [source: Young]
- Continued excessive computer use despite incurring negative consequences, such as marital problems or getting in trouble at work due to computer use [source: Henderson]

Computer Addiction and Child Neglect

One of the most notorious examples of a computer addiction surfaced in Nevada in 2007. Michael and Iana Straw had two young children who were neglected to the point of malnourishment and serious health problems because the couple was so obsessed with playing online games. They were each

Many computer addicts hide their computer use from family and friends.
Negative Effects of Computer Addiction

Computer addiction can have a variety of negative effects on a person. The most immediate are social. The user withdraws from friends and family as he spends more and more time on the computer. Relationships begin to wither as the user stops attending social gatherings, skips meetings with friends and avoids family members to get more computer time. Even when they do interact with their friends, users may become irritable when away from the computer, causing further social harm.

Eventually, excessive computer use can take an emotional toll. The user gradually withdraws into an artificial world. Constant computer gaming can cause someone to place more emotional value on events within the game than things happening in their real lives. Excessive viewing of Internet pornography can warp a person's ideas about sexuality. Someone whose primary friends are screen names in a chat room may have difficulty with face-to-face interpersonal communication.

Over the long term, computer addiction can cause physical damage. Using a mouse and keyboard for many hours every day can lead to repetitive stress injuries. Back problems are common among people who spent a lot of time sitting at computer desks. Late-night computer sessions cut into much-needed sleep time. Long-term sleep deprivation causes drowsiness, difficulty concentrating, and depression of the immune system. Someone who spends hours at a computer is obviously not getting any meaningful exercise, so computer addiction can indirectly lead to poor overall physical condition and even obesity.

Eventually, the consequences of computer addiction will ripple through the user's life. Late-night use or use at work will affect job performance, which could lead to job loss. As the addiction takes its toll on family members, it can even lead to failed marriages [source: Young].

Computer Addiction Controversy

There is a great deal of debate in the medical community about the validity of computer addiction. There is no doubt that some people use their computers, look at Internet pornography, play computer games and chat online too much for their own good. There are even some people whose computer use completely consumes their lives. However, many psychologists believe computer addiction is a compulsive behavior linked to an underlying condition, not something that should be classified as an addiction. People who suffer from "computer addiction" are really people who can't control their impulses, say these critics [source: Surratt]. They claim that some people might identify themselves as having Internet Addiction Disorder as part of a complex social reinforcement process. Video-game addiction might be the result of fear-mongering -- scaring parents into thinking there's something wrong with their kids. Some critics even contend that people who are obsessed with online gaming are no different from people who sit on the couch and watch hours of TV every night. In other words, maybe they're just lazy.
In 2007, the American Medical Association decided that video-game addiction (one possible component of computer addiction) should not be declared an actual disease, pending further research. The American Psychiatric Association also resisted a push to include video game addiction as a mental disorder in the fifth revision of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders [source: ExtremeTech].

**How Pervasive is the Problem?**

Exact statistics on the rate of computer addiction are not available. The problem is not classified as a specific disorder, so there are no diagnostic criteria for determining addiction. Psychology professor Dr. Kimberly S. Young conducted an unscientific survey of Internet users to see how many of them self-identified as Internet addicts. Dr. Young, who is one of the strongest supporters of the "computer addiction as a real addiction" school of thought, found that 80 percent of the people who responded to her survey considered themselves Internet addicts. It is impossible to extrapolate that number into any meaningful statistic, though Young considers it a sign of a "potential epidemic" [source: Young].

**Getting Help for Computer Addiction**

Whatever the classification, excessive computer use remains a problem for some people. If you view computer addiction as a "real" addiction similar to alcoholism, the best way to deal with the problem might be a 12-step program following the precepts of Alcoholics Anonymous. Your doctor, local mental health services or your local AA chapter could help you find an appropriate support group. There are online support groups, but results can be mixed -- some compare these to holding Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in a bar.

If you're looking to curb your computer use, here are some helpful tips:

- Make specific time limits. Set an alarm to go off in one hour and end computer time when it rings.
- Set aside "computer-free" parts of the day. If your computer use starts after dinner and extends into the night, get all your computer work done in the morning and don't touch it after dinner.
- Install software to restrict your access to Web sites that you visit compulsively. Find a friend you can trust to keep the passwords for the software so you can't circumvent it.
- Make a list of things you could be accomplishing instead of wasting time on the computer, and post it prominently near your monitor.
- Enlist family members to help encourage you to limit your use. It might be difficult to stop on your own.
- Put the computer in high-traffic area of the house. With others looking over your shoulder all the time, you'll be less likely to overuse the computer. This is especially effective for parents who fear excessive computer use in their children.

For more information about computer addiction, check out the links on the next page.

**Origins of Computer Addiction**

In 1989, Kevin Mitnick was arrested for various computer hacking offenses. His lawyers offered a novel defense -- that he was addicted to computers and thus not responsible for his actions. The defense worked (though Mitnick's addiction treatment did not -- he was later arrested again for hacking). The case introduced the concept of computer addiction. The term was first mentioned academically in "Computer Addiction," a 1989 book by Margaret Shotton [source: Surratt].

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More Great Links

- Berkeley Parents Network: Computer Game Addiction
- Center for Internet Addiction Recovery

Sources