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New Study Finds Links Between Video-Game Playing and Health Risks in Adults

San Diego, CA, August 18, 2009 – While video gaming is generally perceived as a pastime for children and young adults, research shows that the average age of players in the United States is 35. Investigators from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Emory University and Andrews University analyzed survey data from over 500 adults ranging in age from 19 to 90 in the Seattle-Tacoma area on health risks; media use behaviors and perceptions, including those related to video-game playing; and demographic factors. In an article published in the October 2009 issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, they found measurable correlations between video-game playing and health risks.

Participants reported whether they were players or nonplayers, and weekly usage was collected. Internet usage was assessed, as was the relative importance of the Internet as a social support. The personal determinants examined in this study included self-assessments of depression, personality, health status, physical and mental health, body mass index (BMI), and poor quality of life. Immersion in media environments was evaluated using the participants' estimates of the time they spent during a typical week surfing the Internet and watching TV, including videos and DVDs. The Seattle–Tacoma area was selected because of its size (13th largest US media market) and its Internet usage level is the highest in the nation.

A total of 45.1% of respondents reported playing video games. Female video-game players reported greater depression and lower health status than female nonplayers. Male video-game players reported higher BMI and more Internet use time than male nonplayers. The only determinant common to both female and male video-game players was greater reliance on the Internet for social support.

Writing in the article, Dr. James B Weaver III, PhD, MPH, National Center for Health Marketing, CDC, Atlanta, states, “As hypothesized, health-risk factors – specifically, a higher BMI and a greater number of poor mental-health days – differentiated adult video-game players from nonplayers. Video-game players also reported lower extraversion, consistent with research on adolescents that linked video-game playing to a sedentary lifestyle and overweight status, and to mental-health concerns. Internet community support and time spent online distinguished adult video-game players from nonplayers, a finding consistent with prior

research pointing to the willingness of adult video-game enthusiasts to sacrifice real-world social activities to play video games. The data illustrate the need for further research among adults to clarify how to use digital opportunities more effectively to promote health and prevent disease.”

In a commentary in the same issue, Brian A. Primack, MD, EdM, MS, from the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, applauds Weaver et al. for focusing on the current popularity of video games not only among youth, but also among adults. He suggests that many video games are different enough from original forms of play that they may be better defined as “playlike activities.” He writes, “There are noteworthy differences between the oldest forms of play (e.g., chase games) and today’s ‘playlike activities.’ These playlike activities may stimulate the right centers of the brain to be engaging ... However, the differences between today’s ‘playlike activities’ and original forms of play may illuminate some of the observed health-related correlates discovered by Weaver, *et al.*”

Dr. Primack observes that our greatest challenge will be maintaining the balance: “How do we simultaneously help the public steer away from imitation playlike activities, harness the potentially positive aspects of video games, and keep in perspective the overall place of video games in our society? There are massive, powerful industries promoting many playlike activities. And industry giants that can afford to will successfully tout the potential benefits of health-related products they develop. But who will be left to remind us that – for children and adults alike – Hide-And-Seek and Freeze Tag are still probably what we need most?”

The article is “Health-Risk Correlates of Video-Game Playing Among Adults” by James B Weaver III, PhD MPH; Darren Mays, MPH; Stephanie S Weaver, PhD, MPH; Wendi Kannenberg, MPH; Gary L Hopkins, MD DrPH; Dogan Eroglu, PhD; and Jay M Bernhardt, PhD MPH. The commentary is “Video Games: Play or ‘Playlike Activity’?” by Brian A Primack, MD, EdM, MS. Both appear in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, Volume 37, Issue 4 (October 2009) published by Elsevier.

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Full text of the articles is available upon request; contact eAJPM@ucsd.edu to obtain copies. To schedule an interview with James B Weaver, III, please contact CDC’s Media Relations Office at 404-639-3286. To schedule an interview with Brian A Primack, please contact bprimack@pitt.edu or 412-480-9149.

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