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# Prolonged screen time can cause damage to our eyes

## Be aware of computer vision syndrome

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The evolution of gadgets and digital screens has changed people’s daily lives. These handy companions have become part of day-to-day activities like the use of smartphones and tablets for communication and accessing information, computers and laptops for work and productivity, smart televisions and gaming consoles for entertainment, interactive learning devices for teaching and bridging knowledge, as well as smartwatches that help monitor and manage health.



Technological devices like these have offered unparalleled convenience to most people. However, increased usage of gadgets also means longer exposure and screen time which can lead to several eye health issues.

In the Philippines, cataracts remain the main cause of visual impairment, according to a study conducted by the Philippine Eye Research Institute (PERI). Dr. Leo Cubillian, an ophthalmologist and director of the UP Manila National Institutes of Health’s Philippine Eye Research Institute, revealed that nearsightedness or myopia has been the leading cause of visual impairment among children. While genetics commonly cause myopia, recent studies have shown that lack of exposure to natural light is another factor that makes children, even adults, more at risk if there is uninterrupted gadget consumption.

While new technologies help manage everyday activities, it is important to note that prolonged exposure to screen devices can damage the eyes. According to the recommendations of the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, children up to 18 months should not have screen time, except for video calls with family. For toddlers up to two years old, screen time should be limited to a maximum of one hour per day, with media content restricted to quality educational programs.

Additionally, children aged two to five years old should have less than one hour of screen time per weekday and less than three hours per weekend, with interactive and educational content being advisable.

Meanwhile, children and teens aged six and above should aim for less than two hours of recreational screen time per weekday and focus on making time for other activities.

Adults should limit recreational screen time to two to four hours a day, with work-related screen time around eight hours, while taking breaks in between.

The lengthy use of mobile and digital screens can lead to a wide range of eye strain and discomfort, commonly known as computer vision syndrome. The American Optometric Association also refers to this syndrome as digital eye strain, a collection of eye and vision-related issues resulting from excessive use of gadgets.

Various studies show that the eyes usually get dry and irritated during long periods. This is because people blink less when concentrating on a digital screen, which causes the eyes to dry, particularly for people who stay exposed to screens longer.

“Patients who frequently use computers or cell phones often complain of a foreign body sensation, usually related to dryness. This issue is exacerbated in office environments where air conditioners or fans dry out the eyes, especially since people tend to keep their eyes open for extended periods. This lack of blinking and prolonged exposure can lead to increased dryness and discomfort,” Dr. Beverly Rosas, chairman of the Department of Ophthalmology at the Asian Hospital and Medical Center, explained.

Several eye problems that fall under the computer vision syndrome include eye fatigue, eye strains, blurred vision, eye irritation, double vision, sensitivity to light, eye pain, eyelid twitching, redness, and headache.

Depending on the duration of time a person spends looking at digital screens and the visual capabilities, the severity of these problems can vary and may potentially lead to long-term discomfort.

To make sure one is taking better care of their eyes, one can take an eye exam through an ophthalmologist for a comprehensive evaluation of eye health, including the detection of other underlying issues and a better understanding of overall eye health.

Eye care professionals also recommend integrating regular breaks from screen time, as well as having a balanced diet. For people who are required to have extended exposure to screen time, the 20-20-20 rule can also help reduce eye strain. This means that every 20 minutes, one should practice looking at an object from 20 feet away for 20 seconds.

Dr. Jose Carlos Y. Gana, an ophthalmologist for the medical retina and a consultant for eight years, provides some preventive eye care practices:

- Regular comprehensive eye examinations. These facilitate early diagnosis and treatment of potential eye issues.
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle. This helps prevent various eye diseases and promotes overall eye health.
- Quit smoking. Smoking is a known risk factor for eye conditions such as macular degeneration, a type of eye disease that can block a person's central vision.
- Avoid prolonged direct UV exposure. Excessive UV exposure can increase the risk of cataracts and pterygi-

ums. • Rest your eyes. Regular breaks reduce symptoms of dry eye and digital eye strain. Additionally, Dr. Ezekiel O. Sy, an ophthalmologist from the Manila Doctors Hospital, also shared advice on taking care of our eye health. “As the old saying goes, 'prevention is better than cure.' It is necessary to take preventive steps to ensure good eye health. Some eye problems come with aging, but it does not mean we cannot take extra precautionary measures to delay the symptoms and still maintain healthy eyesight.”

The emergence of technology and digital devices is more beneficial than most people imagine. However, we also need to note that excessive use of these tools can cause harm, significantly impact eye health, and potentially lead to serious eye problems. Proactive approaches to taking care of our eye health, such as managing screen time, maintaining appropriate eye care routines, and seeking regular eye exams, are a few of the essential habits for ensuring overall eye wellness.

If you have been experiencing symptoms, do not hesitate to have your eyes examined and consult with a doctor today.