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Eye experts warn of myopia from too much gadget use

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Eye experts are urging parents to limit their children's use of electronic gadgets to prevent the early onset of myopia, a condition that may not only affect their studies but also increase their risk of developing serious eye problems.



According to optometrist John Ang, about 40 percent of Filipinos suffer from myopia, or nearsightedness, primarily because of the kind of lifestyle they lead. Ang said this figure could grow to as much as half of the population by 2030 if not dealt with properly.

This is a cause for concern, he said, because studies show that children who develop myopia early on have a higher likelihood of developing eye diseases such as cataract, glaucoma, retinal detachment and myopic macular degeneration. And because 80 percent of a child's learning in school is through vision, children with poorer eyesight are also put at a disadvantage, Ang said.

In high-income countries like Singapore, Japan and South Korea, Ang said, the high prevalence of myopia—in about 50 percent of the population—is blamed on the lack of awareness of the eye condition and on people's lifestyles and habits.

“Mobile phones have become the default babysitter. While [mobile devices may be] educational in nature, it is important to control or manage the amount of time our kids spend with gadgets,” said Ang, the vice president for education and professional services of French optical company Essilor.

He said that since there was nothing that could stop the development of myopia, the best recourse was to slow down its progression.

Among the ways to do this, he said, are to “encourage children to spend at least two and a half hours outdoors daily, take a break from using devices every 30 minutes, and ensure that there's enough lighting to avoid straining the eyes.”

A 2015 World Health Organization (WHO) report said that environmental factors played a role in the development of myopia.

Studies showed that children who spent more time outdoors slowed the progression of myopia, while those who performed tasks in downward gaze have higher chances of acquiring myopia.

Emelita Roleda, general manager of Essilor Philippines, said poverty remained a stumbling block in treating myopia in children, especially since the condition is not covered by Philippine Health Insurance Corp.

In an effort to help reduce myopia cases, Essilor had been providing free checkups and corrective glasses to at least 15,000 students in Bataan, Laguna, Cebu and Davao during the last two years, Roleda said.

Myopia typically develops in children between 6 and 14 years old. But adults, as well as those who have a family history of myopia, are also at risk.

Some 1.89 billion people worldwide have been diagnosed with myopia and 2.56 billion people are projected to be affected with it based on the current prevalence rate, according to WHO.