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Are Screens Ruining Your Eyesight?

We're finding that patients are asking, in increasing numbers, if their daily routines are harming their eyesight. And with good reason. The amount of time we spend looking at screens has risen dramatically over the last few decades and while they help us work and keep us entertained, time spent looking at screens isn't all good.

According to new research carried out by Optegra, British workers spend 85% of their waking hours staring at screens. That's a truly astounding average of 13 hours and 34 minutes a day looking at computers, tablets and phones at work, at home and on their commute. And the daily commute seems to exacerbate the problem, with commuters clocking up an average of 55 hours and 36 minutes glued to a screen. No wonder 46% of those surveyed admitted that too much screen time can affect their sleep.

What that means for face-to-face interaction is worrying enough, but is all that screen time bad for your eyes? The bad news is, yes, it can be. It's no coincidence that our optometrists are seeing more and more patients with tech-related eye-strain and Optegra's research backs this up. Many of us spend our working days in front of screens and much of our spare time checking our phones – the potential harm we're doing to our eyesight is scary.

Here, our optometrists explore the facts and tell us what we can do to prevent any damage to our eyes.

What's the problem with screens?

The main problem is that when we look at screens and other digital devices, we blink less than the usual 15 times a minute. In fact, we blink half as much as we would normally and this causes our eyes to dry out. Dry eyes, in turn, can lead to all sorts of problems ranging from blurry vision and irritated eyes, too heavy or tired feeling eyes and excessive tearing.

And if you continue to stare unblinkingly at a screen, you can get eye strain, headaches and possibly raised levels of stress. The more you look at a screen, the higher the level of discomfort. Collectively, all of these symptoms are known as Computer Vision Syndrome (CVS).

Do I Have Computer Vision Syndrome?

Computer Vision Syndrome (CVS) is now extremely common and we are seeing it occurring in younger and younger patients. There's a wide range of symptoms that point to CVS including – sore eyes, dry eyes, teary eyes, blurred vision, double vision, light sensitivity, difficulty focusing on images, neck pain, headache or a combination of all of the above.

And the effects of screen time differ according to various circumstances. For instance – contact lenses and laser eye surgery can exacerbate dryness and irritation; antihistamines or antidepressants can cause eye dryness; and air-conditioned environments, such as offices, can trigger eye irritation. If you have any of these risk factors, you may experience CVS with even minimal screen time.

Is the damage to the eyes permanent?

Luckily for us, the effects of CVS are not permanent and there are things we can do to treat the symptoms, to help your vision become clearer and your eyes more comfortable.

However, in a world that revolves around screens of all types, CVS can easily become a long-term condition, which is just one of the reasons it's important to have regular eye examinations.

It's also important to think about modifying your screen use whenever you can and using tips like the 20-20-20 rule to mitigate the effects.

What is the 20-20-20 rule?

If you have to look at a screen for long periods of time, then the 20-20-20 rule is a good way to help your eyes deal with it. It goes like this – after every 20 minutes of screen time, move your eyes to look at an object at least 20 feet away for at least 20 seconds. Regular breaks help your eyes to rest, to blink normally again and thereby limit eye strain

What else can I do to help my eyes?

There are lots of different things we can do to reduce the effects of screen time:

- Fit an anti-glare, matte screen filter over your computer screen
- Consider a humidifier in your office to counteract the dry air
- Turn off your digital devices up to an hour before bedtime to help sleep
- Use night settings, if your device has them, to help sleep
- Do some blink exercises – to remind yourself to blink!

You can also think about picking up some artificial tears at your optician or in your local pharmacy. They are moisturising drops that you can use as needed if you're spending hours in front of the screen and your eyes begin to feel tired, dry or irritated. Where possible always try to use preservative-free drops, especially if you are using them multiple times a day. And if you wear contact lenses, make sure the drops are suitable.

Does screen time affect children?

Children can develop the symptoms of CVS in exactly the same way as adults. In fact, one study has suggested that several factors make children even more susceptible. For instance, when children play video games they tend to play for long periods, which can lead to dry and strained eyes. To make matters worse, children often do not mention the symptoms, such as blurred vision, because they assume it is normal. And when using desktop computers, which are usually positioned for the benefit of adults, children need to look up at the screen, exposing the eyes and neck to strain.

Is there an optimum screen position to help my eyes?

In general, the most ergonomic position is to have your computer an arm's length from your body. The screen should be situated in such a way that your eyes look slightly downwards, which ensures your eyelids cover more of your eyes, helping reduce eye dryness and irritation.

What's worse for your eyes – computer screens or phones?

The bad news is that all screens, be they computers, tablets or smartphones, all affect our eyes in the same way. They all cause us to blink less. So, when you're thinking about your total screen time, you'll need to include all digital devices.

Also, while there is no evidence to suggest that the blue light emitted from digital screens is harmful to you, it does interfere with the body's circadian rhythm. Blue light, which also occurs naturally, is a stimulant. But exposure to too much blue light at night time can make it harder to get to sleep.

What are blue-blocking lenses and do they work?

Blue-blocking lenses are simply standard optical lenses with a special coating that blocks blue light. It's a great option for anyone who uses digital screens all day and wants to reduce glare and blue light for more comfortable vision and the prevention of eye strain. What's more, blue-blocking lenses also provide higher contrast, improving the clarity of vision and colour perception.

It's important to note, however, that while blue light blocking coatings may help with CVS and digital eye strain, there is no evidence to support claims that they prevent eye disease.

My eyes feel strained looking at a screen what should I do?

Even though we know that looking at screens can impact our eyes, realistically we cannot avoid it. This is why it's important to know what the symptoms of CVS are so we can do something about it.

So, if your eyes are often red, sensitive to light and painful, or if your eyesight is blurry then we recommend you go for an eye examination so we can treat your symptoms at an early stage. As any optician will tell you, regular eye examinations are the single most important thing you can do to preserve the best possible eyesight.

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Eye Academy, Windsor

Ellis & Thompson, Cobham

David Faulder Opticians, Kensington

Peepers Opticians, Banbury

Underwood Eyecare, Ferrndown

Niall O'Kane Optometrists, Strood

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