

A Parent's FAQ on Computer Vision Syndrome

Q&A with VSP Optometrist, Dr. Nathan Bonilla-Warford



While the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends limiting screen time for children and adolescents to two hours per day, recent studies are finding that children ages 8-18 are spending more than 7.5 hours a day consuming electronic media, from computers and smartphones to e-readers and tablets. How will this increased use impact our tech-savvy children's eyes?

To help understand how much is too much when it comes to digital use, along with simple ways to protect your kids from digital eyestrain, Dr. Nathan Bonilla-Warford, VSP® Vision Care Optometrist, answers these frequently asked questions:

Q: What is digital eyestrain?

A: Digital eyestrain, or Computer Vision Syndrome (CVS), is defined as “any number of eye or vision-related problems that can occur from computer use.” Symptoms include: blurry vision, difficulty focusing, dry and irritated eyes, headaches, and even neck and back pain.

Q: Can children suffer from CVS?

A: While some believe that CVS is an adult problem, parents and teachers need to be aware that children can also suffer from CVS! Parents should help kids build good habits when using their beloved digital devices. Observe children when they're using computers or handheld screens and check in with them regularly to find out if they're experiencing any symptoms as noted above.

Q: What causes these symptoms and are they long-term?

A: Many effects of digital use on vision are short-term. In general, the eyes function best when looking at something in the distance, like a house or a tree on the horizon. When the eyes look at something close-up, they have to change focus and position, and this takes a small amount of effort. Over time, this effort adds up, leading to blurry vision, eye strain, or headaches. Also, the eyes blink less when looking at screens and tend to dry out, which can result in blurriness, burning, and discomfort.

Q: What can parents do to help protect their kids against the symptoms of CVS?



- A:**
- **Watch the time!** To avoid fatigue and short-term CVS symptoms, eye doctors recommend consistent breaks. The “20/20/20 Rule” is a good reminder. Every 20 minutes, stop and look at something 20 feet away for at least 20 seconds. Also, set time limits for the maximum amount of “screen time.” It’s recommended that children under two years have no screen time and older children have less than two hours per day. Because children won’t keep track of this, parents must set limits in advance and monitor the time.
 - **Make the computer desk “kid-sized”.** Because kids are smaller, they often have to crane their neck and look up at the screen. If possible, have your child use a computer at a small desk with an adjustable chair with good back support.
 - **Be aware of working distance.** The closer the eyes are to the object they’re looking at, the harder the eyes have to work. Children who get very close to the screen are more likely to experience CVS symptoms. A good rule is to apply the Harmon Distance (the distance between the elbow and first knuckle) as a guide. Watch to see if a child holds video games or books closer than their Harmon Distance. If so, discuss this with their eye doctor to ensure this doesn’t signal a vision problem.
 - **Schedule regular eye exams.** It’s important that a child has the best vision possible when using digital devices. This starts with a comprehensive examination by an eye doctor, not just a school screening. Children should have their first eye exam at six months of age, then at three years of age, before starting kindergarten, and every year after that.
 - **Go outside!** Not only does outdoor play feel good, but there’s research that outdoor play helps prevent the development of nearsightedness. Two hours of outdoor play per day may actually help your child’s vision. Remember to use sunglasses and sunscreen!

For more information visit the VSP Vision Care blog, vspblog.com and:

- Glendale News-Press, “Eyes on Overtime”, Dr. Stacey T. Gin
- Mashable, “5 Important Tips for Better Eye Health in a Digital World”, Dr. Nathan Bonilla-Warford
- ModernMom.com, “Easy Tips to Avoid Digital Device Eye Strain”, Dr. Nathan Bonilla-Warford
- WFAA Dallas Texas, “Computer Vision Problems Now Affecting Children”, Dr. Michael Burton

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