

How to Protect Children from Digital Eye Strain during the Pandemic

What's the impact of digital screens on children's eyes?

Digital devices such as laptops and tablets are important tools for education, giving children access to endless amounts of information and resources. Unfortunately, extended use of digital screens, without taking consistent breaks or the correct adjustments, could impact your child's eyes, causing eye strain, soreness and may even contribute to the development or progression of short sight (myopia).

Digital eye strain

Digital eye strain is a very common condition that occurs from prolonged screen time. Spending too much time focusing on digital devices means your child's eyes may become fatigued, and sitting too close to screens can also strain their eye muscles. Light glare reflected on digital screens can also make this worse, causing children to strain their eyes even more. Symptoms to look out for in your children include eye discomfort, headaches, sore or tired eyes, difficulty focusing, dry eyes, blurred or double vision, and increased sensitivity to light.'

Myopia (short-sightedness)

Myopia, or short-sightedness, refers to the difficulty that some people have focusing on objects at a distance, while close objects can be seen clearly. It is difficult to pinpoint specific causes of short-sightedness, but there has been some research to explain possible contributing factors to the condition.

The NHS says, while it can often run in the family, short-sightedness may be linked to 'focusing on nearby objects, such as books and computers, for long periods during childhood'. Further research has found that children are twice as likely to experience myopia now than 50 years ago, which could also be linked to the increase in digital screen use during childhood, alongside an overall decrease in outdoor time.

So, it is possible that the extended use of digital screens without breaks and spending less time outside may increase the risk of children becoming short-sighted. Many children returning to school after the long summer break may begin having trouble focusing on objects that are further away, such as the whiteboard or smartboard in the classroom.

Does blue light impact children's eyes?

Recently, there has been a lot of mention of blue light and the potential effects that exposure may have on the eyes, including in children. Ultimately, there is no definitive research to suggest that the blue light from digital screens can have a negative impact on your child's eyes. What many people believe to be 'blue light damage' is usually just digital eye strain that occurs as a result of frequent screen use or an underlying small prescription relating to myopia (short-sightedness) or hyperopia (long-sightedness).

Back to school tips for keeping children's eyes healthy

While it's not possible for your child to stop using screens altogether, there are a few things you can do to help protect your child's eye health.

Follow the 20:20:20 rule

The 20:20:20 rule is simple. It means your child should look away from their screen every 20 minutes, and look at something 20 feet away, for at least 20 seconds. You should encourage your child to follow this rule as it will relax their eye muscles and help to reduce the risk of many symptoms of digital eye strain.

Adjust their screen positioning

It's also important to make sure all digital devices or screens are at the correct distance for your child. The screen should be slightly below their eye level, as looking up at screens widens the eyes and dries them out quicker.

Another guide for screen distance is the 1-2-10 rule. This says that mobile phones should ideally be one foot away, laptops and computer screens should be two feet away, and televisions should be 10 feet away. This would allow your child's eyes to focus properly on screens at the correct distance.

Schedule some outside time

Children should also be encouraged to make the most of their outside breaks. The time spent outside will not only give the eyes a rest from focusing on a screen or the board, but will also give the mind a chance to slow down and relax too.

Stay hydrated

Water is important for every aspect of your health - and your eye health isn't any different. Staying hydrated will help to avoid dry eyes, so it is good for students to keep their water bottle close by and topped up.

Establish media-free times

It's also a good idea to arrange some media-free times every day to help reduce your child's eye fatigue and remove any fixation or reliance on digital devices. This could be establishing 'screen-free' time in the evenings, using this time to connect as a family — with parents leading by example and turning off their digital devices too.

Book annual eye exams

If you've noticed a change in your child's vision over the past few months, or they've reported some of the symptoms above, it's best to arrange an eye test. We recommend that children have their eyes tested every year to ensure their eyes remain healthy during this important developmental stage.