



Parish Nurse Notes – August 4, 2024

Children's Eye Health and Safety Month

The American Academy of Ophthalmology has proclaimed August as Children's Eye Health and Safety Awareness Month to raise awareness of children's eye health. This month also aims to educate parents and caregivers on the steps that should be taken to ensure that students are provided with the best opportunity to have a successful school year through a healthy vision. Common refractive abnormalities in children are myopia (nearsightedness), hyperopia (farsightedness), and astigmatism. A pediatric optometrist can not only detect them but also other severe eye conditions such as amblyopia (lazy eye), strabismus (crossed eyes), ptosis (drooping of the eyelid), and color deficiency or color blindness. According to statistics, one out of 20 children between the ages of three and five has a serious eye problem, and if not treated on time could result in permanent vision impairment. Most preschoolers do not receive routine eye screening, which is crucial to identify if children suffer from eye disease. Children are unique, and so is their sight. Safety and eye health are essential components of a fulfilling childhood and child development. Most childhood learning occurs visually; therefore, good vision is critical for a child's physical and intellectual well-being. Common signs of concern about eye health are frequent rubbing of the eyes, squinting, tilting, or turning your head to look at objects. The child can also squeeze his eyes, or you can notice his eyes wandering.

What's Wrong with Unlimited Screen Time?

There are many reasons for parents to be thoughtful about how much screen time they allow their children. Amount of screen use per day has been associated with developmental outcomes, obesity, poor sleep quality and eye development. Research from Canada has also found that preschoolers who had more than two hours of screen time per day had a nearly-8-fold increase in ADHD.

"Safe" Amounts of Screen Time Vary by Age

Expert organizations have created guidance for parents to help understand the facts uncovered in scientific research. The World Health Organization's 2019 guidelines suggest no screen time at all for children before age 1, and very limited screen time for children for several years after that.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no digital media use (except video-chatting) in children younger than 18 to 24 months, and focusing on educational media when children do start using screens.

Is Screen Time Bad for Kids' Eyes?

Effects of Screen Use on Children's Eyes

The American Academy of Ophthalmology does not have specific recommendations for amount of screen time for children. But parents should be aware of the possible effects of screen use on children's eyes, as well as the broader health concerns raised by other groups like the WHO.

Myopia (Nearsightedness) and Close Work and Reading

The number of people developing nearsightedness in the United States has nearly doubled since 1971. In Asia, up to 90 percent of teenagers and adults are nearsighted, a dramatic increase over recent generations.

A 2019 study published in *Ophthalmology*—the journal of the American Academy of Ophthalmology—offers more evidence that at least part of the worldwide increase in nearsightedness has to do with near work activities. It's not just screens affecting eye development, it's also traditional books and the amount of time spent indoors overall. The study also found that spending time outdoors—especially in early childhood—can slow the progression of nearsightedness.

Digital Eye Strain

Digital eye strain isn't a single eye condition, like glaucoma or pink eye. It's a name for the kinds of symptoms that people experience when they spend too long looking at a screen. These symptoms can include dry eyes, itchy eyes, blurry vision and headaches. These symptoms are temporary, and no permanent damage is being done to the eyes.

The easiest way to avoid digital eye strain (or eye strain from any extended near-focus task like reading or sewing) is to make sure to blink often and to look up from your screen or close-up work every 20 minutes and focus at least 20 feet away for 20 seconds. This strategy of frequent re-focusing is called the 20-20-20 rule, and lets the eyes relax and reset.

Sleep Disruption from Screen Use

While some of the dangers of blue light may have been overhyped in recent years, screen use too close to bedtime can harm sleep quality. And sleep is important enough to childhood development that the World Health Organization made sleep one of the focuses of their latest recommendations.

How to Protect Children's Eyes During Screen Time

Pediatric ophthalmologist and Academy member Luxme Hariharan, MD, recommends a simple five-step strategy, BLINK 20-20-20, to help prevent screens from damaging children's eyes and vision. These same tips are good practices for adults and anyone suffering from chronic dry eyes or eye strain.

- **B - BLINK:** Blinking helps moisturize the eyes. Set a 20-minute timer and, when it goes off, look at an object 20 feet away for 20 seconds while blinking and relaxing the shoulders and neck muscles. This will force the eyes to reset, refocus and relax.
- **L - LUBRICATE:** Lubricate your eyes with artificial tears throughout the day. Artificial tear ointment at night may be helpful as well. If you wear contact lenses, try wearing

glasses to reduce dryness while using electronic devices. If your house is dry, consider using a humidifier.

- **I - INCHES AWAY:** Keep the computer or desk an arm's length away and at a slight downward angle from your child's face. Adjust the computer screen's settings, including contrast and brightness, so that it is comfortable for your children. Avoid using screens outside or in brightly lit areas, where the glare on the screen can create strain. Also, maintain good posture while using a screen. Poor posture can contribute to muscle tightness and headaches associated with eye strain.
- **N - NEAR DEVICE BREAKS:** Encourage children to go outside or play with a pet, sibling or non-electronic toys when taking breaks from online learning or computer use. Or look out the window for 20 seconds after completing a level in a video game. Pre-mark books with a paperclip every few chapters to remind your child to look up. On an e-book, use the "bookmark" function for the same effect.
- **K - KNOW YOUR SOURCES:** Rely on eye health information from trusted sources, including your child's pediatrician, pediatric ophthalmologist, the Academy or the American Association of Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus. For example, there is no scientific evidence that the light coming from computer screens is damaging to the eyes. Because of this, the Academy does not recommend blue light glasses or any special eye wear for computer use.

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