Effects of Prolonged Computer Time

Is Your Increase In Screen Time Leading To HEADACHES, VISION FATIGUE, and SORE MUSCLES?

By Maureen Barton, OTR/L

Parents, children, health care providers, and students are all working on computers for many more hours during the day since the shelter-in-place orders took effect due to Covid-19. Given the pandemic and the shelter-in-place requirements many clinics and schools have converted their hands-on services to remote services. As a pediatric occupational therapist, I personally have gone from spending 1-2 hours per day on electronic devices to spending 6 – 8 hours per day. Many of the children I know are spending 3 – 5 hours for school on the computer and then additional time playing video games, sometimes for the rest of the day. According to the [Washington Post](https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/03/24/screen-time-iphone-coronavirus-quarantine-covid/) the average screen time has increased to 8 hours per day for many of us.

I feel the need to share this information as I see many of these difficulties popping up in my life and in the lives of those I work with.

There are serious repercussions from this increased time spent on devices. In my own life I have increased neck and wrist pain. There are postural demands in using devices that negatively affect our muscles: sore backs, sore necks, shoulder stress, wrist stress. It is important to evaluate your seating height, desk height, and location of your monitor and keyboard. While sitting at your desk your feet should be flat on the floor and the desk should be around elbow height. If you need to adjust your feet you can use a foot stool to keep your feet supported. Your chair should be supportive or use alternative seating like a yoga ball chair. The monitor should be at eye level to decrease neck stress. The keyboard should be situated so that your wrists are supported comfortably. It is important to get up and move during the time that you are at the computer. Sometimes, I set up my platform so that I can stand while I am on the computer. I also get up and do stretches in between meetings.

Not so obvious but just as impactful are the negative influences on our eyes and vision. One of my clients had to recently get eyeglasses because her vision was getting blurry from spending so many hours on the computer. Sometimes people have blurry distance vision after using their near vision for prolonged periods of time. It is difficult for your eyes to relax and refocus to see clearly after using the muscles to converge your eyes on near work for prolonged periods of time. Not only does this cause blurry distance vision but it also triggers headaches. While providing therapy for my clients I have seen those who work on computers all day that have experienced excessive blurry vision while driving home after work. This is a very dangerous situation. The primary recommendation I make to these people is to take vision breaks at least every hour during their day. This consists of looking far into the distance for several minutes. If you are seated near a window, let your eyes wander outdoors. Regular refocusing on distant objects prevents eye fatigue. Another aid to relieve eye strain is to consciously blink. While staring at a monitor we blink less causing our eyes to dry out. You may also want to use eye drops to keep eyes lubricated.

Another difficulty from looking at a monitor all day is the blue light affects. The blue light from screens may negatively affect your eyes. Research is not conclusive in this area so talk to your eye care doctor to get recommendations. Electronics emit blue light that may cause problems with vision acuity, eye stress, dry eyes, and sleep – disrupting your biological clock. Turning off devices in the evening promotes better sleep hygiene. There are eyeglasses with filters to reduce the effects of blue light on your body.

So, remember:

* Evaluate posture
* Take movement breaks (set a timer to remember)
* Take vision breaks (set a timer to remember)
* Blink often, use eye drops if needed
* Wear blue light filters if recommended by your eye doctor

As we care for ourselves in avoiding Covid-19 (staying distant, wearing a mask, washing our hands) we also need to take care of our bodies while we are quarantined and sitting at our computers. Stay safe, stay healthy!

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