

INSIGHTS

Screen time habits for good eye health



Children and teens are spending an increasing amount of time on digital devices for both learning and leisure. Lockdowns, remote learning, and online learning have resulted in a surge of young people complaining about sore eyes, blurred vision, headaches, red eyes or general eye fatigue.

Research suggests that there has been an increase in myopia (nearsightedness) rates for children and teenagers during the pandemic. Myopia is a vision condition in which someone can see objects near to them clearly, but objects farther away are blurry.

One [study](#) revealed an almost 400% increase in six-year-olds presenting with myopia symptoms during the 2020 lockdown. The phenomenon referred to as ‘quarantine myopia’. Experts believe that screen time may be to blame. HCF Health Insurance data shows over 20% more school-aged children had claims entered for glasses or contact lenses in 2020, compared to five years ago.

While it may seem logical to blame these negative impacts solely on screens, there’s emerging evidence to suggest that screens alone may not be triggering or causing eye strain or myopia. The pandemic has not only led to an increase in screen time but has also resulted in kids spending more time inside and less time outdoors in natural sunlight. Family history is also a known risk factor for children developing myopia.

Given that kids will need to continue to rely on digital technologies for their learning and leisure, parents, carers and educators need to equip them with the strategies that will support their eye health and reduce the impacts of screen-related eye conditions such as eye strain and myopia. Following are some simple strategies to help keep screenagers’ sight healthy and in optimum condition.

Keep an eye on their eyes

Be on the lookout for symptoms such as headaches, blurry vision, squinting, or rubbing eyes, as they may indicate potential eye issues. Take your child to an optometrist if symptoms persist.

Teach them the 20/20/20/20 rule

Every 20 minutes, they should take at least a 20 second break, look into the distance for 20 metres to develop depth of vision, and blink 20 times – because when they stare at a screen their blink rate declines by 66%.

Remind them to close their eyes

Learning through screens is mentally taxing, depleting the two regions of the brain which process what they see and hear online. Encouraging kids to close their eyes, even if just for 10 seconds, gives these regions of their brain a much-needed break. It increases alpha waves in their brains, leaving them feeling focused and alert after a short break.

Remember the arm's length rule of thumb

Remind your kids to keep all their digital devices and reading materials at least an arm's length away from their eyes.

Brighten up

Make sure kids read with appropriate lighting, as poor surrounding light increases eye strain. You may need to adjust the brightness on the screen they are using, or the lighting in the room.

Encourage them to head outdoors

Research shows that young children who spend more time outdoors are less likely to be short-sighted as teenagers, so ensure your children get at least two hours of 'green time' time a day. Evidence also reveals that just 40 seconds in nature will reduce stress levels.

Given that technology plays a pivotal role in kids' lives, it's essential that parents, carers and educators equip kids with the skills and strategies that will protect their eye health. This requires strategies to deploy when kids are using devices and ensuring that their tech time doesn't displace vital offline experiences, such as time in nature. Yet another reason why we need to balance their 'screen time' with their 'green time'.



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Dr Kristy Goodwin is a digital wellbeing and performance speaker, author and researcher (and mum who also deals with her kids' techno-tantrums!). She's the author of *Raising Your Child in a Digital World*, and a media commentator who doesn't suggest that we ban the iPhone, or unplug the gaming console (digital abstinence isn't the solution). Kristy translates research into essential information and realistic strategies for parents to ensure kids and teens thrive in the digital world. For further details visit www.drkristygoodwin.com.