

Give Your Child's Eyes a Screen-Time Break: Here's Why



Children spend more time than ever staring at digital screens—on computers, tablets, TVs, smartphones, and other devices. All that screen time can take a toll on children's wellbeing, including how their eyes may feel.

What We Know Now:

[Research](#) shows children begin zooming in on digital media devices, such as their parents' tablets or smartphones, as young as 6 months old. By their teens, kids spend nearly 7 hours a day using screened-based media, watching TV, playing video games, and using social media; this doesn't include additional time spent using screens at school or for homework.

Especially if they're having fun, children might keep playing and watching to the point of eye-rubbing exhaustion.

Staring at a screen for long stretches without taking breaks can cause symptoms such as:

- **Eye fatigue.** Muscles around the eye, like any others, can get tired from continued use. Concentrating on a screen for extended periods can cause concentration difficulties and headaches centered around the temple and eyes. Children may also use screen devices where lighting is less than ideal, causing fatigue from squinting.

- **Blurry vision.** Gazing at the same distance for an extended time can cause the eye's focusing system to spasm or temporarily "lock up." This condition, called an *accommodation spasm*, causes a child's vision to blur when he or she looks away from the screen. Some studies also suggest computer use and other indoor activities may fuel rising rates of [myopia](#) (nearsightedness) among children, although this is not yet proven. More time playing outside may result in healthier vision development in children.
- **Dry eyes.** [Studies](#) show that people blink significantly less often when concentrating on a digital screen, which can leave eyes dry and irritated. Desktop and laptop computer use can be especially tough on children's eyes, because they're usually situated higher up in the visual field than a book, for example. As a result, the upper eyelids tend to be open wider—speeding up evaporation of the eye's tear film.

What Parents Can Do:

- **Monitor screen time.** The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) family [media use plan](#) and related reports target issues ranging from obesity to sleep problems linked with too much screen time. Guidance offered can help keep kids' eyes and vision healthy by encouraging balance between the digital and real world. Two especially important aspects of this are making sure screens don't cut into:
 - **Sleep.** Not getting [enough shut-eye](#) leads to tired, sore eyes. The AAP recommends children not sleep with devices in their bedrooms, including TVs, computers and smartphones. In addition, the AAP recommends avoiding exposure to screens for 1 hour before going to bed. Using devices past bedtime, especially for [violent video games](#) or shows, can interfere with sleep. Studies also suggest the blue light given off by screens might also make it difficult to sleep.
 - **Exercise.** Putting down the device or stepping away from the computer or TV can help avoid eye and vision problems from too much screen time. The AAP [recommends](#) children age 6 years and older get at 60 minutes of physical activity each day. [Active play](#) is the best exercise for young children. Outside play can also be a great "workout" for children's vision—giving them a chance to focus at different distances and getting exposure to natural sunlight.
- **Take frequent breaks.** Children frequently get so absorbed in what they're doing that they don't notice symptoms of eye strain. Remind them to take breaks. The American Optometric Association recommends the [20/20/20 rule](#): look away from the screen every 20 minutes, focus on an object at least 20 feet away, for at least 20 seconds. In addition, children should walk away from the screen for at least 10 minutes every hour. A simple timer can help your child remember, and there are even software programs can help by turning off the screen in regular intervals.

- **Remember to blink.** [Research](#) published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* says staring at a computer can cut blinking rates by half and cause dry eyes. Encourage your child to try to blink extra, especially when they take breaks. Your pediatrician or eye doctor may recommend moisturizing eye drops or a room humidifier if your child continues to be bothered by dry eyes.
- **Screen positioning.** Make sure the screen on your child's desktop or laptop computer is slightly below eye level. Looking up at a screen opens eyes wider and dries them out quicker. Some experts suggest positioning device screens based on the [1/2/10 rule](#): mobile phones ideally at one foot, desktop devices and laptops at two feet, and roughly 10 feet for TV screens (depending on how big the screen is). Adjusting the font size—especially on smaller screens—so it's twice as big as your child can comfortably read may also help reduce eye fatigue.
- **Spotlight on lighting.** To cut down on glare and eye fatigue, a [study](#) published in the *Journal of Ophthalmology & Research* says the level of lighting in a room when using a computer or other screen should be roughly half what it would be for other activities such as writing on paper or working on crafts. Try to position computers so that light from uncovered windows, lamps and overhead light fixtures aren't shining directly on screens. Decrease the brightness of the screen to a more comfortable level for viewing. Some optometrists recommend special computer glasses with orange lenses that may also help reduce glare. Children who wear prescription eyeglasses may have an anti-reflective coating added, as well. Computer monitor hoods or shades that attach to the screen may also be an option.
- **Get regular vision screenings.** If your child is having blurry vision or similar eye problems, he or she may not speak up. That's why regular [vision screenings](#) are important. The American Academy of Ophthalmology and the AAP recommend children have their eyes checked by a pediatrician at well-child visits beginning at birth. If a problem is found during one of these routine eye exams, your pediatrician may refer you to a [pediatric ophthalmologist](#).

Remember...

Children, especially younger ones, will likely need help and reminders to use digital screen devices in an eye-friendly way.

If you have any questions about keeping your child's eyes and vision healthy, talk with your pediatrician.

Additional Information & Resources:

- [Why to Limit Your Child's Media Use](#)
- [Healthy Sleep Habits: How Many Hours Does Your Child Need?](#)

- [Warning Signs of Vision Problems in Infants & Children](#)
- [How to Make a Family Media Use Plan](#)
- [Visual System Assessment in Infants, Children, and Young Adults by Pediatricians](#) (AAP Policy Statement)
- ["Computer Vision Syndrome" and Children](#) (American Association for Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus) – States that children with normal eyes do not develop "computer vision syndrome" that can, infrequently, be associated with the aging eye

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