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Media Contact: Lisa Stose
Desautel Hege Communications
(509) 444-2350

Increased Computer Use by Children Raises Red Flags

Parents and teachers should keep watch for symptoms of Computer Vision Syndrome

Children today use computers for many aspects of their lives, often working on computers as much as adults. Prolonged computer use is causing optometric physicians in Washington State to consider many kids to be at high risk for developing Computer Vision Syndrome (CVS).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, nearly 175 million Americans use computers including more than 90% of children ages 9-17. CVS is a widely recognized vision problem associated with prolonged computer use. It affects people of all ages, but is a growing concern for children who are now accessing computers in school and at home.

“Prolonged computer use is a fact of life these days, even for children,” said Dr. Todd Wylie. “We’re seeing the negative effects of kids using the computer too often for long periods of time and must get the word out about what parents, teachers and caretakers can do so children don’t suffer.”

The American Optometric Association (AOA) defines CVS as “the complex of eye and vision problems related to near work which are experienced during or related to computer use.” Excessive viewing of the computer screen can lead to eye discomfort, fatigue, blurred vision, and headaches. Despite the fact that an estimated 60 million Americans suffer from CVS and that treatment costs are estimated at \$2 billion a year, the condition remains virtually unknown to consumers.

Optometric physicians are beginning to see an increase in the number of adult patients requesting eye exams due to symptoms they experience at the computer; however, some unique aspects of how children use computers may make them more susceptible than adults to develop problems. The younger the computer user and the more immature the eyes, the more likely they are to suffer eye problems. Additionally, children often do not complain of symptoms even if they are experiencing them and therefore don’t receive proper treatment.

Children are very adaptable. They often ignore vision problems, thinking that blurred vision must be normal, and that everyone must see that way. Children may also be more vulnerable than adults because they are more likely to perform enjoyable tasks with great concentration until near exhaustion (e.g. marathon video-game sessions with few, if any, breaks) and are physically smaller than adults so computers, which are designed for adult use, don’t fit them well.

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Optometric physicians are paying more attention than ever before to CVS signs and symptoms during comprehensive eye exams. Technology is available that allows physicians to simulate exactly how the patient's eyes react to a computer display monitor. One example is the FDA-approved device developed by the PRIO Corp. that eye doctors can use to evaluate CVS. This and/or similar devices can yield information for determining if special glasses need to be prescribed just for use with computer work.

"Children aren't thinking about the constant refocusing their eyes endure when they play games and surf the Internet," Wylie said. "We have technology now that allows us to examine a patient's eyes as they look at an imitation computer screen so we can determine if special glasses are needed to relieve strain and balance the visual system."

It is very important that children receive yearly comprehensive eye exams to check for CVS and other vision problems and diseases. In addition to an annual exam, parents and teachers should remember the following tips to reduce the potential for CVS in children:

- **Strictly enforce the amount of time that a child can continuously use the computer.**
- **Arrange the computer to fit children; lower the screen, raise the chair, etc.**
- **Adjust the room lighting so no glare reflects off the computer screen.**
- **Reduce the amount of light in the room to match the computer screen, but do not completely turn it off.**

Visit www.eyes.org for more information on Computer Vision Syndrome, its symptoms and how to prevent it.

The Optometric Physicians of Washington (OPW) is the professional association of Washington State optometric physicians. The OPW is comprised of 13 optometric societies throughout the state numbering approximately 600 private, corporate and HMO optometric physicians.

*The **mission** of the OPW is to advance, improve and enhance the vision care and eye health of the public and to promote the continued development of the profession of optometry.*

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