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Always staring at the computer screen — Is this hazardous to my health? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

What is an unhealthy amount of time to spend in front of a monitor? It seems like everything I do, from workstudy work to classwork to play, entails sitting in front of a computer for hours on end. Any feedback on this would be much appreciated.

Going blind, sterile, or otherwise?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Dear Going blind, sterile, or otherwise?

In today's technologically advanced world, it may seem as if every activity involves staring at a screen. With the dramatic increase in home and office computer use, muscle and joint pain, overuse injuries of the upper limbs and complaints of eye fatigue and discomfort are commonplace. However, all of these ailments can be reduced or eliminated with proper workspace design, improved posture, and good working habits.

Eye care specialists have noticed problems related to extensive staring at computer screens, such as eyestrain, headaches, fatigue, dry eyes, and difficulty focusing. However, extensive testing has shown that eyestrain will not permanently damage the eyes or cause a loss of vision. However, it can be very uncomfortable and lead to a loss of productivity. To reduce eye discomfort, it is recommended to:

- Make sure your primary light source (such as a window) is not shining into your face or directly onto the screen.
- Tilt the screen slightly to eliminate reflections or glare.
- Make sure your computer screen is not too close to your face.
- Position the screen so that it is either at eye level or slightly lower.
- Reduce the contrast and brightness of your screen by adjusting the settings.
- Frequently look away from the screen and focus on faraway objects.

- Have regular eye examinations to check that blurring, headaches and other associated problems are not caused by any underlying disorders.

Another common problem associated with computer use is repetitive stress injury (RSI), such as carpal tunnel syndrome. RSIs occur when a certain muscle or tendon is repeatedly overused or kept in an awkward position. If you spend long hours at a computer, you might want to take some of the following steps to prevent RSIs:

- Use a firm, adjustable, and comfortable chair. Adjust your chair height so that your thighs are horizontal, your feet are flat on the floor, and the backs of your knees are slightly higher than the seat of your chair. The back of the chair is meant to support your lower back.
- Relax your shoulders. Be sure your upper arms and forearm are forming a right angle, with your wrist and hand in roughly a straight line.
- Type on the computer keyboard as you would play the piano, with fingers up and down. Don't rest your wrists and move your fingers sideways to type.
- Position the mouse at the same height as your keyboard. When you slide the mouse around, move your entire arm and not just your wrist.

Don't forget to get up and move! Take breaks of at least five to ten minutes every hour or so to walk around and stretch. Stretch your lower back by standing up and pulling each knee to your chest, holding that position for a few seconds. Also, despite your busy, technology-laden schedule, it is always recommended to maintain an active lifestyle that includes regular physical activity.

Lastly, people have expressed concern about the exposure to electromagnetic radiation from their computer screens. This is the same concern expressed about microwave ovens, cellular phones, and even high voltage power lines. While computer screens emit both ionizing and non-ionizing radiation, emissions are often so low as to be unmeasurable.

"Playing" can happen off-line, too, so make sure your social life is balanced with real friends and activities — not just virtual ones!

Alice!

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