

TIME How to Protect Your Eyes While Staring at a Screen All Day

Jamie Ducharme. February 7, 2025 1:51 PM EST.



Getty Images/fStop

If your job involves [sitting in front of a screen all day](#), there's a good chance your eyes are paying the price. After hours of emails, video calls, and spreadsheets, you may be left with symptoms like a headache, dry or uncomfortable eyes, and blurry vision.

"It's an occupational hazard in a digital society," says Dr. Douglas Wisner, chief of cataract and primary eye care at Wills Eye Hospital in Philadelphia.

Why do these visual symptoms happen, and are they cause for concern? Here's what to know.

Why does looking at screens cause blurry vision?

There are two main reasons, says Amy Watts, director of vision rehabilitation at Massachusetts Eye and Ear hospital. First, you blink much less than normal when you're focusing on a screen, which dries out the eyes. "Your eyelids are like your windshield wipers on your car. They're making sure that the surface is smooth and clear," she says. When you're not blinking as much, it's as if raindrops are accumulating on your windshield, making it harder to see.

Second, the muscles in your eyes get tired after hours of training your focus on a fixed point. "All of these muscles have to work just perfectly...in order to see clearly," Watts says. They get tired as the day goes on, and vision slips as a result.

These issues can lead to temporarily blurred vision and a range of other symptoms, including headaches as well as redness, itchiness, fatigue, or general discomfort in the eyes.

How can I avoid or treat digital eye strain?

Taking visual breaks throughout your work day is the most important thing you can do. Experts often suggest following the 20/20/20 rule, which says that every 20 minutes, you should look at least 20 feet into the distance for 20 seconds or longer. But [recent research suggests](#) that even the 20/20/20 method may not be enough to avoid digital

eye strain, and that longer breaks—say, a five-minute break every hour—may be better.

Read More: [Are 'Broken Skin Barriers' a Real Thing?](#)

"Overall, the message is: take a break and don't focus on a computer screen for eight hours," Watts says. "It helps to relax your focus and let those muscles take a little break." (Short breaks are also a great opportunity to get up, stretch, and move, [which can improve overall health.](#))

Eye drops can also help counter the dryness that comes from reduced blinking, Watts says. You can use eye drops to treat symptoms you're already experiencing, but they work best when used preventively. If you know you tend to get blurry vision at the end of the day, put in drops every few hours throughout the day, Watts recommends. Just make sure you're using preservative-free products, as drops with preservatives can irritate the eyes, she says.

Finally, make sure your lighting is bright and your screens are clean, Watts says. A dirty or smudged screen makes it harder for your eyes to focus, so they fatigue faster.

What about blue-light glasses?

Is it worth wearing glasses that claim to block the [blue light](#) from digital devices? "The best I can say is it doesn't hurt," says Steven Reed, president of the American Optometric Association. But there's not much data on these products, and [studies that have been published](#) suggest they don't do much to alleviate eye strain.

While you probably don't have to shell out money for blue-light glasses, Wisner says it is worth limiting screen time before bed, since using devices at night can interfere with sleep. "Not getting good sleep is also a cause of chronic fatigue and then eye strain," he says. "It all builds on itself."

Should I be concerned about digital eye strain?

Don't worry too much, Wisner says. Most of the time, digital eye strain is not a signal of a major issue or damage, but rather an understandable side effect of using your eyes in a way they were not designed to work.

"For hundreds and thousands of years, we weren't doing these things to our bodies: sitting at a desk and staring at a computer or reading all day long," Wisner says. "Our bodies were not adapted for this."

Read More: [How to Relax and Unwind Without Drinking Alcohol](#)

That said, regular, persistent, or severe eye strain can be a sign of underlying vision problems, Reed says, so it's worth getting checked out if the symptoms are bothersome or don't clear up through simple solutions like breaks and eye drops.

There may be a relatively quick fix, like using over-the-counter reading glasses or tweaking a prescription you already have, Wisner says.

And if your children complain of symptoms like blurry vision and eye discomfort after using devices, take them seriously, Reed says. [Some studies suggest](#) that screen use can contribute to myopia, or nearsightedness, among children whose eyes are still developing, so it's worth getting any symptoms checked out by a doctor, Reed says.