

EYE-Q

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Dealing with Eye Strain

Lately I have been getting a lot of questions about the eyes being damaged from overusing them. Here is a recent question that came across my desk that is not unlike many others I am hearing and reading.

Q: I have been working a lot of extra hours on the computer at work lately. By the time I get home my eyes are sore and I have a headache. I was always told as a child not to over use my eyes or I would strain them. Is it really possible to strain my eyes from too much work and what can I do to help them feel better?

A: Eye strain is a term used to describe sore or tired eyes. Eye strain is a common problem among people who do a lot of reading or computer work. Your eye strain could be caused by one or more of the following:

- You have a vision problem (for example, you are farsighted or your eyes do not line up properly making it hard for your eyes to work together).
- You do one task for a long time without a break (such as reading, computer work, or even a long drive). The muscles that move and focus your eyes get tired of staying in one place.
- Your workstation is not set up correctly. Poor lighting or glare off a computer screen or window is often a problem.

You may have one or any of a combination of symptoms of eye strain which may include sore or tired eyes, blurred vision, squinting to see more clearly and headaches across your brow or at the back of your neck.

If you are having symptoms it is important to see your ophthalmologist for an eye exam. Your eye doctor will ask about your symptoms and how long your eyes have been hurting, what you are doing when your eyes hurt, and how often it happens. Your doctor will then carefully test your distance and close-up vision in addition to tests of your eyes' ability to focus and work together will also be done. Your doctor will check the health of your eyes to make sure that the symptoms are not caused by a more serious medical condition.

If your eyestrain is caused by a vision problem, your doctor will probably give you a new prescription for eyeglasses or contact lenses. Patients over 40 begin to develop presbyopia, the natural loss of ability to focus on close objects. When this happens, your doctor will prescribe either reading glasses or one of several types of bifocal lenses.

If doing one task for a long time is causing your eyestrain, you should take short breaks to let your eyes rest. At least every 20 minutes look at least 20 feet away for 20 seconds.

If your eye strain is caused by your computer workstation, you will want to make some adjustments.

- First, put your monitor 22 to 28 inches from your eyes. Then, make sure the top of the screen is no higher than eye-level.
- If you need to look back and forth between your paper and your computer screen, use a paper holder that holds your paper next to the computer screen (at the same height and distance as your computer monitor).
- Try to keep the room lighting at about the same brightness as the computer screen. Avoid having a bright window in front of you or behind you. This really helps cut glare and reflections.
- Finally, be sure to take a 15 minute vision break away from the monitor every two hours to give the retinas a rest from the bright monitor screen.

The best way to take care of yourself is to have your eyes examined every one to two years. Many people think it is normal for their eyes to hurt after a long day, but it is not. If you have symptoms of eye strain, see your ophthalmologist. Don't wait until your yearly eye exam.

If you have questions about your eye health e-mail Dr. Barowsky at doctom@tdkj.com and we'll try to answer your questions here at Eye-Q.