

Screen Use and Eye Strain

Patient information leaflet

What is happening

Prolonged screen work does not damage the eyes, but it asks them to work in a way they were not designed for. Two things happen at once: the focusing muscle holds a near target for hours without release, and the blink rate falls by more than half. The blinks that remain are often incomplete, so the oil glands in the lids are not emptied and the tear film breaks up too quickly.

What you may notice

- Aching or heavy eyes, and headaches around the brow or temples by late afternoon
- Blurring that clears when you blink or look into the distance
- Grittiness, burning or watering
- Difficulty refocusing between the screen and the distance
- Symptoms that improve at weekends and return on Monday

What actually helps

- The 20-20-20 rule. Every twenty minutes, look at something about six metres away for twenty seconds. This releases the focusing muscle.
- Blink deliberately. Several full, complete blinks every few minutes — the upper lid must meet the lower.
- Screen position. Top of the screen at or slightly below eye level, about an arm's length away. Looking slightly downwards exposes less of the eye surface.
- Air. Direct air-conditioning vents away from your face; a humidifier helps in dry offices.
- Light. Avoid a bright window directly behind or in front of the screen. Increase the text size rather than leaning closer.
- Lubricate. Preservative-free artificial tears used before symptoms start, not after.

Glasses and screens

An uncorrected prescription — even a small one — makes screen work far more tiring, and an out-of-date prescription does the same. From the mid-forties onwards, dedicated intermediate or office lenses are usually more comfortable than standard reading glasses. Blue-light filters have not been shown to reduce eye strain; the measures above are what work.

Children and screens

In children, prolonged close work is associated with faster progression of short-sightedness, while around two hours of daylight outdoors each day is associated with slower progression — and costs nothing.

Arrange an examination if you have

- Headaches that persist despite these measures
- Double vision, or one eye drifting
- Blurring that does not clear on blinking or looking into the distance
- Eye pain rather than tiredness

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Notes for you from today's consultation