

Wendy Haaf answers your questions about health, nutrition, and well-being

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Will blue light from high-tech devices increase my risk for age-related macular degeneration (AMD) and vision loss?

A That's certainly a reasonable question in light of ads warning that such devices could cause dire damage to the retina and touting blue-blocking glasses as the solution. Then there's the concern that blue light could disrupt the internal rhythms that regulate the sleep/wake cycle.

First, there's no reason to panic over high-tech devices' purported effects on vision and retinal health (it's the central part of the retina that's damaged in AMD). It's true that some older studies suggested that blue light could damage cells in the retina, or damage the pigments that protect these cells, particularly in view of the surge in our exposure from LED fixtures, smartphones, tablets, and computers, but this research was done in animals and cell cultures, not people. While we still don't have high-quality studies examining the effects of screen use on the human eye, reassuringly, "studies looking at blue-blocking lenses implanted into the eye after cataract surgery have failed to show a difference over regular lenses, which block only ultraviolet light," notes Dr. Panos Christakis, a retina specialist at Toronto Western Hospital and an assistant professor at the University of Toronto. So while more work needs to be done, there's no compelling evidence that devices pose any threat to eye health or vision.

There *is* a case to be made for the possibility that blue-light exposure may interfere with nodding off at bedtime, according to Shamrozé Khan, an assistant clinical professor at the School of Optometry and Vision Science at the University of Waterloo (ON). "There is evidence that using a screen into the night will give you cues to stay awake," she says. "But even then, is it the blue light or is it because we're staying up later to read an

interesting article? We still need to tease that out." Meanwhile, someone having sleep difficulties should "limit screen time in the hour before bedtime and try not to bring the phone into the bedroom," she suggests.

One thing staring at screens for hours can do, however, is cause symptoms of eye strain, such as soreness, grittiness, burning, and even blurred vision. If taking regular breaks (for example, pausing every 20 minutes to look 20 feet in the distance for 20 seconds) and using lubricating drops doesn't offer sufficient relief, your eye-care professional can help sort out whether the cause is something else, such as a change in a medication prescription or sensitivity to glare.



Proven strategies for protecting your vision include wearing sunglasses that block 100 per cent of UVA and UVB rays when outdoors, since exposure to ultraviolet light is a known risk factor for multiple eye conditions. As for AMD, "the best way to prevent macular degeneration is to lead a healthy lifestyle,

which includes a diet rich in leafy green vegetables," Christakis says, "and to avoid smoking." Needless to say, this also includes going for regular eye exams; the earlier any potential problems are detected and treated, the better your chances of maintaining good vision. ■

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