

SCREEN SAVER

Computer vision syndrome is common, but it can be prevented (even without putting down your tablet).



It wasn't until she had her vision checked on a whim that Rayna Swanson* discovered she had a problem with her eyes. Knowing experts recommend a first eye exam for children between six and nine months of age, the Vancouver mother of one had been making an optometrist appointment for her nine-month old son when she decided she might as well get examined, too. The verdict? While Swanson's vision was 20/20, tests revealed her eyes were extremely dry.

Swanson's optometrist, Dr. Mini Randhawa, diagnosed her with computer vision syndrome, a term describing a group of eye and vision-related problems that can affect people who spend a lot of time looking at a computer, tablet, e-reader or mobile phone screen. "She asked how much time I spend in front of a computer," recalls Swanson. "I told her at least 45 hours a week in front of a screen at work, not to mention the time using my iPhone or tablet at home."

Many of the symptoms Dr. Randhawa described - including frequent headaches, difficulty switching focus, sensitivity to light, and tired, strained, gritty-feeling eyes - were things Swanson was experiencing, but didn't realize were cause for concern. "I had no idea the headaches and the tired, burning eyes I'd been feeling weren't normal," she says.

"Our eyes are actually designed to look off into the distance," explains Dr. Randhawa. So, focusing on objects or screens up close means more work for your peepers. Over time, eye muscles can become tired,

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— Rayna Swanson

sore and strained, just like other muscles in the body when they're pushed to the limit. Making matters worse, people only blink a third as often as they should when looking at a screen, compromising the eye's protective tear film.

While treatments for computer vision syndrome range from tiny plugs that slow tear drainage, to procedures that help strengthen the tear film, the fix was much simpler in Swanson's case. Dr. Randhawa prescribed an over-the-counter eye drop (a lubricating artificial tear) to be used twice a day, and recommended some simple preventative strategies, including following the 20/20/20 rule while working at the computer, to give her eyes a rest. [See column at right to find out how it works.]

"If I hadn't decided to get an eye exam, I'd still be walking around with headaches all the time," says Swanson, who now makes annual eye exams part of her family's routine. "Given my job and lifestyle, my amount of screen time isn't likely to change significantly, but now I know how to protect my eyes and keep them more comfortable."

Now see here!

Give eyes a break with these smart strategies for reducing eye strain and minimizing the risk of computer vision syndrome. They're good for the whole family!

- **Limit screen time.**
Reduce the number of consecutive hours spent staring at a screen.
- **Take 20/20/20 breaks.**
Every 20 minutes, take 20 seconds to focus your eyes on something at least 20 feet away.
- **Keep your distance.**
Position screens at about arms-length from your face, for maximum comfort.
- **Use appropriate lighting.**
Sit with light fixtures on the far side of the device and set screen lighting to maximum contrast. Wherever possible, coloured backgrounds should be avoided.
- **Try a computer aid.**
Your Doctor of Optometry can recommend special glasses for computer use to help reduce eye strain, as well as anti-glare screen filters.

*Name changed upon request

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