

ARE YOUR GADGETS MAKING YOU SICK?

Ever wondered how gadgets affect our health? **Stephanie Yap** finds out from the doctors what to look out for.

1 Eye strain

Research conducted by the College of Optometrists found that we spend nearly 50 hours a week looking at screens, which is bad news for our eyes. Prolonged usage can result in computer vision syndrome (CVS), a term coined by the American Optometric Association. CVS, or digital eye strain, is a blanket term for eye- and vision-related problems that occur from focusing the eyes on a computer or other electronic gadgets for long periods of time. "Those who suffer from CVS often complain of discomfort in the eyes and vision problems," explains Dr Dinesh Kumar Ramesh Chandra, a consultant ophthalmologist at Columbia Asia Hospital. Prolonged use of gadgets may also cause the early development of presbyopia – farsightedness that usually occurs in middle and old age.

Treat it: *Dr Dinesh advises against using your gadgets for more than two hours a day. However, with that number becoming increasingly unrealistic, it's recommended to take regular screen breaks instead. "Avoid wearing contact lenses while you're looking at your screen to prevent dry eyes. Lubricate your eyes with eye drops before starting work and don't forget to blink," he advises. Dr Paul Ngalap Ayu, a consultant orthopaedic and paediatric orthopaedic-spine surgeon at Columbia Asia Hospital, also suggests increasing font sizes so you don't squint while reading.*

THE EXPERTS



Dr Paul Ngalap Ayu, consultant orthopaedic and paediatric orthopaedic-spine surgeon

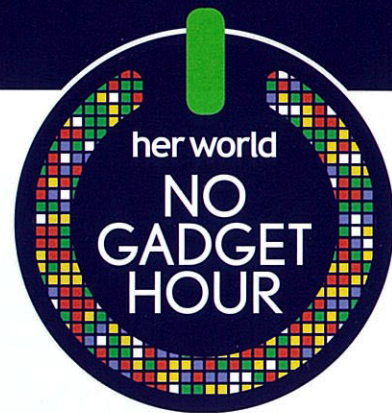


Dr Dinesh Kumar Ramesh Chandra, consultant ophthalmologist



Dr Lai Eng Meng, consultant paediatrician

Do you own a smartphone, TV, laptop, or tablet? Chances are, you spend more time on your gadgets than you do on sleep. According to an Ofcom study, in a day, the average adult spends eight hours and 41 minutes on their gadgets, compared to eight hours and 21 minutes on sleep. This proves that most of us spend half of our waking hours staring at a screen, rather than engaging in healthy activities that benefit our bodies. While personal devices have undoubtedly improved our lives, overreliance and addiction comes with negative health consequences.



2 Tech neck

Ever caught yourself hunching over your computer or looking down at your smartphone? If you answered yes, you're more likely to be plagued by 'tech neck' – a kind of neck pain or strain that results from constantly looking down at your phone, or not having good posture while you're in front of the computer. "When we look at our phone, we like to rest our arms on the table or somewhere below eye level, because that's the most comfortable position for our hands," explains Dr Paul. In this position, we're actually asserting pressure on our bones and muscles around the neck, which can damage the spine in the long run.

Treat it: *Be mindful of your posture – most importantly, do not hunch your back. The ideal position, as recommended by Dr Paul, is to have your tablet, phone or computer screen at eye-level. Bend your knees at a right angle while keeping your feet flat on the floor. Get a small pillow or cushion for your back or, better yet, invest in a chair with lumbar support.*

3 Sleep disruption

Hands up if you scroll through your social media feed or watch videos before you sleep. Yes, it's entertaining and relieves stress, and for most of us, bedtime is the only time we have to ourselves. However, looking at your phone or any kind of electronic gadget before you sleep can cause sleep deprivation. In fact, numerous studies have shown that being exposed to the blue light emitted by your phones at night prevents the production of melatonin, a hormone that tells our bodies it's

time to sleep. Not to mention, "Sleeping with your phone close to you causes hyper-vigilance because subconsciously, you're expecting a call or text," explains Dr Paul.

Treat it: *"Never, ever look at your phone in the dark," says Dr Dinesh. Not only does it keep you awake, but it also harms your eye sight. The other thing you can do to have better sleep is to put your phone beyond reach. This way, you won't be tempted to turn on your phone in the middle of the night to check for messages or emails.*

4 Text claw

While it's not an official medical diagnosis (yet), those who spend lots of time on their gadgets, especially tech-savvy individuals, have definitely felt the effects of text claw – pain, strain or stiffness in the fingers and wrists – after prolonged usage of their phones. It can lead to a medical condition known as tendonitis – inflammation of the tendon – which causes aching, numbness and pain in the wrist. "Some also like to rest their hands on the table's edge while using a mouse, and that's bad because constant pressure on your wrist will cause fibrosis, also known as carpal tunnel syndrome," explains Dr Dinesh. "It's a painful condition of the hand and the fingers caused by compression of a major nerve that passes over the carpal bones through a passage at the front of the wrist, alongside the flexor tendons of the hand," he adds. Carpal tunnel syndrome is usually caused by repetitive movements over a long period and its symptoms include tingling and numbness.

Treat it: *Get yourself a wrist rest to support your wrist while typing or when using a mouse. It's also helpful to take a break after you've been working for an extended period of time.*

5 Childhood obesity

It's tempting to shove gadgets at your children to keep them occupied while you attend to your business, but doing this too often may instil unhealthy habits among youngsters. In fact, according to a review done by *Obesity* in 2012, a lot of screen time may increase the risk of obesity in children. "Children who spend more time playing with their gadgets will spend less time burning off calories and vice versa," says Dr Lai Eng Meng, a consultant paediatrician at Columbia Asia Hospital. Marketing strategy also comes into play, as according to a report in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* in 2008, nine out of 10 food advertisements shown during children's programming are low-nutrient foods. Over time, this can have a large influence on a child's food preference and health.

Treat it: *Limit the usage of technology. Dr Lai recommends no more than two hours of screen time for kids above two years old (it's not advisable for toddlers below two to play with electronic gadgets). As a parent, find ways to negotiate with your kids. "For example, you can let your kids watch television for an hour, then get them to finish up their homework. When they're done, 'reward' them by giving them another hour to play video games," suggests Dr Lai. You can also pick an activity that the both of you enjoy and do it every day. This way, you can distract them from their gadgets and spend quality time as a family too!*