

9 Health Hazards of Electronic Devices for Kids

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A Battle Worth Fighting

There may be parents among us who are battle-weary, having fought to tear our children away from their handhones, tablet computers and whatnot. It is always tempting to give in, believing that our kids will have to learn to be tech-savvy sooner rather than later.

Stay easy — up to two hours a day is quite safe, but beware the following health problems that could arise from too much screen time and poor tech habits, besides the risks of addiction:

1. Bad Posture, Back Aches, Neck and Shoulder Strain



- It's an instantly recognisable silhouette: the figure hunched over a device. Pretty soon, that hunch is there even when the device isn't. To make it worse, the back and shoulder muscles start complaining, too.
- An uncomfortable seat, a set-up with poor ergonomics, sitting too long or slouching lazily — these all contribute to the problem.
- Laptop computers can aggravate things because the monitor and keyboard are so close. Users either lift their shoulders to type, or hunch their shoulders to see.

Related: “Sit up Straight, Darling”

2. Pain in Wrists — Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

- This classic overuse injury shows up as pain, stiffness or swelling in the fingers and wrist.
- Is your child twisting his wrist to use the mouse in an awkward way? Or does that game have him make forceful or repetitive movements? Is she texting for long periods? These can injure nerves and tendons. “It hurts when I write with my pen” is an excuse for not doing homework that you don't want to hear!

3. Eye Strain



- Dry eyes, a burning sensation, problems focusing... these are symptoms of eye strain that all device users commonly face.
- Bright light, high screen contrasts, glare and flickering images may make a game or video more exciting, but really take their toll on your eyes. Squinting at a small hand-held device adds to the strain. An enraptured kid is also less likely to blink, which makes things worse.
- Additionally, not spending time on outdoor activities exposes children to the risk of developing myopia.

4. Headaches

- Children seldom get headaches, but too much screen-time can bring one on.
- A combination of muscle tension at the base of the skull and an assault on the eyes is the usual cause, as well as stress.

5. Stress

- Time spent on devices may feel indulgent, but studies have shown that overuse increases stress levels instead.
- Constant stress over a prolonged period could adversely affect the heart, sleep, digestion and emotions.

Related: 3 Heritage Trails to Hit This Weekend

6. Physical Fatigue

- Too much time on a device doesn't just drain the brain, it tires the body, too.
- Being still for long periods reduces blood circulation and can put stress on muscles and joints. The result — getting tired without even moving much.

7. Poor Sleep Patterns



- Research has confirmed exposure to mobile phones and other devices can cause changes in brain activity and sleep disturbances. This could also be a stress symptom.

8. Obesity

- Tech devices make great babysitters because they keep kids still for so long, but that lack of physical activity is a major contributing factor to childhood obesity and its accompanying risks.

9. Compromised Immunity

- A 2011 study by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine revealed 92% of handphones harbour bacteria, including 16% with the dangerous E.coli strain. In our climate, such bacteria can survive for hours!
- When exposed to all those germs on devices, which can easily be transferred from kid to kid, it's only a matter of time before they fall ill.

Will overuse of electronic devices cause cancer?

No, there is no proven link, but as cancer takes many years to develop, current studies may not be the last word on the subject.

In the meantime, some researchers recommend that handphones be used a minimum 20cm away, and for limited periods, to reduce radiation exposure.

Related: Make Fitness Fun For Your Kids

Smart Habits for Tech-Smart Kids



All's not lost if we teach our children to develop good tech habits. Remember the two-hour guideline and you can keep the kids tech-happy and healthy, too! Try introducing smart apps like fitness trackers instead of games, or online apps for mindfulness or focus training, instead.

Tech's not all bad — it's still a great tool when it comes to watching our health. In addition, there is much that we, as parents, can do to help, from setting time limits and organising alternative physical activities by age to providing the right tools.

- Increase outdoor physical activity time. Experts in Singapore recommend that younger children spend an average of three hours a day outdoors to protect them from the onset of myopia. A more active lifestyle will also stave off obesity, keep them fit and keep their minds off their devices!
- Reduce time spent unnecessarily on hand-held devices or the computer. Consider setting limits, so that there is less argument when it's time to stop.
- Take five-minute vision breaks after every 30-40 mins of device time. The eye is at its most relaxed when it's focusing at a distance of about 6m away. Greenery has been found to be especially soothing. Kids can also close their eyes, or use eye drops if needed.
- Move it! When not typing or using the hands, do rest the arms, and perform some stretches. Get up to keep blood circulating, and remember to use the bathroom, too!
- Help set up the computer station to suit your child's height. Invest in an ergonomic chair, and teach your child to type or play gently, as unnecessary force increases the risk of overuse injuries.

What's the proper posture for computer use?

The computer screen should be at or slightly lower than eye level. The main source of light (e.g. window) should not shine straight in your face or onto the screen.

The keyboard should be at a height whereby your forearms are roughly parallel to the floor. Your elbows should rest comfortably at your sides. Use an ergonomic chair that allows your spine to hold its natural curve.

Your feet should rest flat on the floor (you can also use a footstool). The mouse should be placed as close to the keyboard as possible, at the same level as described for the keyboard, so that your wrists and hands are naturally positioned. Use your whole arm, not just the wrist, when using the mouse.

- Make sure your child gets enough sleep at night. Sleep experts also discourage using devices in the hour before bed.
- Teach kids to pay attention to their surroundings — devices are the most hazardous as a distraction, especially on roads. Even at home, it's not funny when a kid walks into a sharp table corner or bumps into someone carrying hot food. Safety first!
- Encourage more face-to-face interaction, which helps them develop their social skills and connectedness.

Parents can also talk to their children about their own tech habits, share relevant articles, and introduce new activities.

Related: Get Fit the Techie Way



Time out!

Singapore has a wealth of outdoorsy places to explore. It's time to pack the devices away, pack the kids up and discover our island's many gems!

- Start with a nature walk in the neighbourhood park, or visit one at random — take turns to choose a spot off a map! You can also fit in a workout on Sundays at the Park.
- Gear up and go on a hiking trip.
- How about an outdoor photography expedition to one of our nature reserves?
- Did you know Singapore still has several farms? Visitors are generally welcome.

- There are always the familiar favourites: the Zoo and River Safari, Botanic Gardens, Sentosa, and East Coast beach never fail to please.

Don't let tech hijack your bonding time with your child!

Giving up the best of the growing-up years to tech will only lead to regret. Create better experiences and memories to cherish, instead.

Visit Parent Hub, for more useful tips and guides to give your child a healthy start.

Read these next:

- Healthy Parenting Tips
- Ideas For An Active Weekend
- 10 Fun Ways To Get Active

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