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More young children with poor vision

EXCESSIVE use of smartphones, tablets or other types of computers in early childhood increases the risk of developing short-sightedness.

"Studies show that lifestyle is responsible for about half of all cases of short-sightedness," says ophthalmologist Dr Bettina Wabbel, who points out that evidence of a link between computer use and short-sightedness has so far come mainly from East Asian countries. "This wave is now headed towards us."

Children under three years who frequently stare at a computer screen close to their face can develop a slightly elongated eyeball, Dr Wabbel explains.

"Once the eye has lengthened, it no longer shortens," she says. "The eyes' development is irreversible from about age 12."

When the eyeball is elongated, the lens focuses light from far objects slightly in front of the retina rather than directly on it. The

result is short-sightedness.

Dr Wabbel recommends that four- to six-year-olds spend no more than 30 minutes a day in front of a computer, and kids under 10, no more than an hour.

Computer use by children can cause vision problems chiefly because the screen is close to their eyes.

"A television set isn't as bad, since it's farther away," she says.

Short-sightedness isn't the only kind of eye trouble children risk with excessive screen time, she adds. Staring for long periods at a flat screen can impair their depth perception and ability to alternate between near and far vision, possibly leading to blurred vision and crossed eyes. It can also cause their eyes to become irritated, tired and dry.

What's more, the blue (short-wavelength) light from computer screens suppresses production of the sleep-inducing hormone melatonin, says ophthalmologist

Dr Nicole Eter.

For this reason, children shouldn't use a computer for an hour or two before they go to bed, and the same goes for adults.

"Computers are like sweets," Dr Wabbel remarks. "They're very enticing to children, but you've got to limit their use; the younger the child, the less the screen time."

Whether it's a smartphone, tablet, laptop or desktop, it's not the size of the screen that matters. Instead of viewing a digital display of any kind, she says it's definitely better for small children's eye development to play with building blocks and engage with the real world, both indoors and out.

As the German

Ophthalmological Society notes, the prevalence of short-sightedness has increased sharply in industrialised countries in recent years. Some 95% of young adults are short-sighted in East Asia, while the percentage is lower in European countries. — dpa



Short-sightedness is not the only risk for young children using a device on a daily basis. — Filepic