

# Taking Care of Your Eyes at the Screen

Reid Goldsborough

**O**ne of the less appreciated concerns about using, or overusing, digital technology is the effect it has on your eyes.

Whether it's a desktop PC, laptop, netbook, e-reader, tablet, portable media player, smartphone, or game console, staring at it too long can lead to "computer vision syndrome."

Experts aren't in agreement about the long-term effects—whether this and other forms of close work can cause or aggravate myopia (near-sightedness), which is the ability to clearly see things near to you but not things far away.

Among the incontrovertible short-term effects of too much screen work are dry and itchy eyes, eye redness, blurred vision, double vision, temporary inability to refocus your eyes, sensitivity to light, and headaches. All it takes to develop the beginnings of symptoms like these is two hours a day of computer use, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

Periodically, new software and hardware products are introduced to try to prevent or minimize such problems. Among the latest free software products are Gimme a Break ([chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/ggmioqkppdfnhaflhnhicpenfhkd-cpo](http://chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/ggmioqkppdfnhaflhnhicpenfhkd-cpo)) and Auto Timer ([addons.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/addon/auto-timer/?src=search](http://addons.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/addon/auto-timer/?src=search)), which are free extensions to the Google Chrome and Mozilla Firefox Web browsers respectively. Each periodically reminds you to take your eyes off the screen.

On the hardware side, there is a hot product category called "bias lighting." The idea is that you direct lighting behind your screen to decrease the contrast between the brightness of what's on your screen and what's behind it. Cyborg Gaming Lights ([www.cyborggaming.com/prod/ambx.htm](http://www.cyborggaming.com/prod/ambx.htm)) work not just with games and cost \$100. Antec's Halo 6 LED Bias Lighting Kit ([store.antec.com/Product/soundscience/bias-lighting/0-761345-77020-0.aspx](http://store.antec.com/Product/soundscience/bias-lighting/0-761345-77020-0.aspx)) has fewer bells and whistles but costs only \$13.

Computer eyeglasses have been around for a while, and they can be particularly helpful for people who need reading glasses or bifocals for reading a book or restaurant menu. Gunnars Computer Eyewear ([www.gunnars.com](http://www.gunnars.com)) are eyeglasses, available with either

prescription or nonprescription lenses, that feature lens tints and antiglare coatings designed to reduce eye fatigue. They start at \$80.

But along with protecting your vision in front of a screen—as with much else related to the digital world—one important and often overlooked consideration is "appropriate technology." The latest and greatest products and services, often packing a lot of whizbang and carrying high sticker prices, aren't always the best ways of addressing the problem.

With your eyes, it goes without saying, it's all about light. The three most effective solutions I've found for computer vision syndrome are low-tech lighting fixes.

1. Arrange the position of your work station or work position. Lighting should come to you from the side. If it comes from behind the screen, it will shine into your eyes. If it comes from behind you, it will create glare on your screen. Some people prefer natural lighting, such as from a window, but that's not always an option, and light bulbs do fine.

While you're at it, make sure your monitor isn't positioned too high, causing you to raise your head and open your eyes too wide. That can cause both dry eyes and a sore neck. You should be looking slightly downward.

2. Customize the lighting of your monitor. Operating systems, such as Microsoft Windows, let you personalize how text is displayed within any program. Choosing an option that displays light text on a black background, instead of the default of dark text on a white background, means that much less light is shining into your eyes every second, which can greatly reduce eyestrain.

With Windows 7, for instance, right-click on your desktop, click "Personalize," and try "High Contrast #1." To return to the default whenever you want, you can press at the same time the keys "Shift," "Alt," and "PrtSc/SysRq." Hit the same keys again to go back. A small minority of Web pages don't display well in high contrast, so you'll need to do this with them. The browsers Microsoft Internet Explorer and Mozilla Firefox handle high contrast better than Google Chrome.

3. Take eye breaks. This can be easier said than done when you're focused intently on a work project—or game. But nothing could be easier than looking away from your screen every 20 minutes or so, for about 20 seconds, or simply closing your eyes for the same amount of time.

Sometimes when we stare at the screen, we don't blink, which can lead or contribute to dry eyes and eyestrain. When you are looking at your screen, try to program yourself to blink at regular intervals.

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Reid Goldsborough is a syndicated columnist and author of the book *Straight Talk about the Information Superhighway*. He can be reached at [reidgoldsborough@gmail.com](mailto:reidgoldsborough@gmail.com) or [www.reidgold.com](http://www.reidgold.com).

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