Computer Eye Strain

About 143 million people in the United States work on a computer every day.

According to the American Optometric Association (AOA), 50% to 90% of them experience some computer-related eye discomfort. Common complaints include itching, burning, tearing or dry eyes, headaches and blurred vision. The term "Computer Vision Syndrome" (CVS) is used to describe these complaints.

About 14% of patients who schedule eye exams do so because of CVS. Despite the vast number of workers who suffer from some form of CVS, many people don't even realize that it is the cause of their discomfort, or aren't sure what to do to minimize it.

If you are experiencing any of the symptoms, schedule a comprehensive eye health exam. Even a slight refractive error can affect both your comfort and productivity at work. You may be surprised to learn that computer users who have uncorrected vision are 20% less productive than those who wear eyeglasses or contact lenses with the correct strength. This is true even if vision is impaired so slightly that you don't notice it.

Make sure that you discuss your computer use with the doctor during your annual eye examination. He or she may suggest special computer glasses or adjust your lens prescription for use at the computer. Reading glasses are designed to help you focus about 14 inches away from the eye, where most people hold their reading material. They are insufficient for reading a computer monitor, which is farther away.

Rearrange Your Workspace

Once you have had your eye exam, the next step may be to rearrange your work space slightly. It's best to set up your desk so that your computer monitor is about 20 to 24 inches from your eyes and about 15 to 20 degrees lower. This position is the best for neck and shoulder posture. It will help minimize fatigue and prevent neck and back strain.

Also, make sure that your work area is illuminated evenly and that the light doesn't shine directly on the monitor. Reflections or glare from windows or overhead lighting can make it more difficult to see the screen clearly.

The lighting in most offices was designed for viewing printed material on a flat surface, so it is nearly twice as bright as it needs to be for viewing a computer monitor. If the lighting can't

be adjusted, consider placing an anti-glare screen or a hood on your monitor to make it more comfortable to view.

Another easy way to reduce eye strain is to adjust the image on the monitor itself. The greater the contrast setting, the easier it will be to read. Black letters on a white background are best. You should also select a font size that is at least three times greater than the smallest font you can read.

Give Your Eyes a Rest

While working on the computer, you will blink less often than usual, which may cause your eyes to feel dry and irritated. When this happens, stop working for a minute or two and slowly blink your eyes 10 times to help rewet them. The eye doctor may also suggest artificial tears.

Like any other muscles, your eye muscles can become fatigued. Looking at the screen for prolonged periods of time can make your eyes tired because they are constantly focused at the same distance. To give your eyes a chance to relax, the AOA recommends applying the "20/20 rule." Take a break every 20 minutes and focus your eyes on something about 20 feet away for 20 seconds.

The "computer age" has changed the way most American workers spend their day. It has allowed greater productivity and improved our ability to communicate with one another. But it has taken a toll on our eyesight. Fortunately, most of the side effects can be easily prevented or corrected by following the suggestions listed here and by having regular comprehensive eye health exams.

Sources: American Optometric Association, Archives of Ophthalmology, All About Vision