1.0 Eye strain

Eye strain or eye fatigue is a common condition. The symptoms include tired, itching, and burning eyes. It is rarely a serious condition and common sense precautions at home, work and outdoors may help prevent or reduce eye fatigue.

Sometimes eye strain is a sign of an underlying condition that may need medical treatment. If eye fatigue persists despite taking simple precautions, seek medical advice. This is especially important if your eye fatigue is associated with headaches or with eye problems such as:

- Pain or discomfort
- Double vision
- Significant change in vision

2.0 Causes of eye strain

Any activity that requires intense use of the eyes for a prolonged time or under difficult conditions can cause eye strain. These include extended periods of:

- Reading
- Computer work
- Driving

Exposure to bright light or straining to see in dim light can also cause eye strain. One of the most common causes of eye strain is staring for long periods at digital devices such as:

- Computer screens
- Smartphones
- Video games

This type of eye fatigue or eye strain is sometimes known as computer vision syndrome (CVS). It affects about 50% - 90% of people who work at computers, however, the problem is not limited to working adults. While children are less susceptible to eye strain, those who stare at portable computer games or computers throughout the day can also experience eye problems.

The problem is expected to grow as more people use smartphones and other hand-held digital devices. Research shows that people hold digital
devices closer to their eyes than they hold books and newspapers. That forces their eyes to work harder than usual as they strain to focus on tiny font sizes.

Digital devices may also be linked to eye strain because of a tendency to blink less often when staring at a computer screen. People usually blink about 18 times a minute. This naturally refreshes the eyes. But studies suggest that people only blink about half as often while using a computer or other digital device. This can result in dry, tired, itching and burning eyes.

3.0 Symptoms of eye strain

Eye strain is associated with uncomfortable and annoying symptoms, such as:
- Sore or irritated eyes
- Difficulty focusing
- Dry or watery eyes
- Blurred or double vision
- Increased sensitivity to light
- Headache or brow-ache

It may be accompanied by pain in the neck, shoulders or back due to holding a bad posture for a prolonged period. These symptoms can decrease your productivity and may be intensified by sleep deprivation. During sleep, the eyes are replenished with essential nutrients. Lack of sleep may result in persistent eye irritation.

4.0 Prevention of eye strain

Usually eye strain can be prevented or reduced by making simple changes in your work habits or environment. Here are some prevention tips:

a) Make changes to your computer screen, such as:
- Place the screen 51cm to 66cm (20 to 26 inches) away from your eyes and a little below eye level.
- Regularly clean off dust and fingerprints from the screen. Smudges on the screen can reduce contrast and increase problems with glare and reflections.
- Choose screens that tilt and swivel.
- Consider using a glare filter over your screen.
b) Make changes to your work environment, such as:
   • Change lighting to reduce glare and harsh reflections. Avoid lighting directly behind or above a computer screen.
   • Use an adjustable chair.
   • Place a document holder next to your computer screen.

c) Make changes to your work habits, such as:
   • Try the 20-20-20 rule. Every 20 minutes, look away - ideally to the horizon or infinity - or at least six metres (20 feet) in front of you for 20 seconds.
   • Stick a note that says 'blink' on the computer as a reminder.
   • Take regular breaks from computer work.

d) Take care of your eyes with these steps:
   • Apply a flannel soaked in warm water to tired, dry eyes (with eyes closed).
   • Consider artificial tears to refresh your eyes when they feel dry.
   • To help prevent dry eyes while working indoors, consider using an air cleaner to filter dust and a humidifier to add moisture to the air.

If eye strain persists despite these simple interventions, make an appointment with an optometrist for a comprehensive eye check-up. Your eye strain may be related to an underlying condition such as an eye muscle imbalance. If you wear prescription glasses or lenses, recurring eye strain may be an indication that you need updated glasses or a new prescription.

(Source: www.webmd.boots.com)