

## Computers Can Be a Real Pain

Every parent is aware of the dangers associated with children and computer use. The World Wide Web is crawling with Internet predators, cyber bullies and sites inappropriate for young eyes. But many parents are not aware of the dangers that lurk even before the kids log on.

Pediatricians are now seeing an increase among young computer users in eye strain, neck and shoulder pain, wrist and back discomfort, headache and fatigue.

### **Kids and computers**

For many years, doctors have reported a broad range of musculoskeletal complaints among adult computer users. Now researchers say many of those same problems are affecting children as well. In addition, eye strain is also a frequent complaint, experienced by nearly 38 percent of children who use computers.

The average American child now spends at least two to three hours every day on the computer doing homework, talking online with friends and playing games. More than 90 percent of school age children have access to a computer at home or in school, and children as young as two are logging time in front of the monitor.

They tend to sit at the edge of their chairs, thereby increasing back and neck pain. They reach for the mouse, which causes shoulder pain. They twist their necks to see a poorly positioned monitor, triggering neck pain. They distort their wrists using a badly placed keyboard, bringing on carpal tunnel syndrome. They strain their eyes staring at a monitor that is too far away.

### **Posture is important**

In short, kids who hunch over a computer at a workstation not designed for them are risking long-term health effects. The key to prevention is to teach young people proper posture and to provide them with ergonomically correct workstations.

You can help your child use the computer more safely and comfortably by following these suggestions:

- Monitor computer time. Children can lose track of time when in front of the computer. If necessary, set a timer to remind the child to take a break every 30 to 60 minutes.
- Make sure her feet are flat on the floor. The knees shouldn't be higher than hips. If necessary, use a foot stool to support dangling legs.

- Position the monitor at eye level. Be sure the child's neck doesn't have to twist, tilt or strain to view the screen. The recommended distance between the monitor and the eye for children is 18 to 28 inches. By viewing the computer screen closer than 18 inches, children risk straining their eyes. A glare guard on the monitor will also help reduce eye strain.
- Adjust the height of the keyboard to keep the wrists straight (in line with the forearm) and elbows bent at a 90 degree angle. Place the mouse close to the keyboard to reduce the amount of reaching. For small children, consider purchasing a child-sized keyboard and mouse designed for smaller hands.
- Make sure the back of the child is touching the back of the chair so that he is not leaning into the computer.

Once a child leaves a computer workstation, she should continue to practice good posture in order to ward off back pain. Tell your child to:

- Stand up straight! That is, make sure your knees are straight, but not "locked" into place. Distribute your weight evenly on both legs. Pull in your stomach, straighten your shoulders and hold your head erect, as if you were balancing a book on it.
- Walk tall! Walk with your feet pointing straight ahead. Your arms should swing freely at your side. Look straight ahead, never down.
- Sit up! Sit tall with both feet on the floor and your back against the back of the chair. Your weight should be distributed evenly on both buttocks. Hold your head erect.

**Reviewed by:** Patrick S. Pasquariello Jr., MD