"My family spends too much time connected to screens. What can I do to reduce our screen time?"

There are rules and limits you can set for your family and yourself.

"Screen time" is a term used for activities done in front of a screen, such as watching TV, working on a computer, looking at your phone or playing video games. Screen time is sedentary activity, meaning you are being physically inactive while sitting down.

Too much screen time can affect both children and adults.

Headaches, neck aches, backaches and shoulder aches – When you look down at your phone or other device, your neck muscles have to support the weight of your head. This can strain the muscles, as the average weight of the head is 10-12 pounds.

Stress and sleep troubles – Constant exposure to information from social and normal media—even positive information— can be overwhelming. Too much troubling and negative news can cause anxiety. The light from screens like TVs and tablets can also interfere with the body's natural ability to wind down before sleep.

Weight gain – Time spent in front of screens reduces time spent being physically active. This can lead to weight gain and other unhealthy conditions, such as higher blood sugar levels.

Eye strain and dryness – The time staring at screens adds up and can strain eyes, making them red and weary. Also, when focusing and looking at screens, people tend to blink less often, leading to dry eyes.

Children and screens

Children between ages eight and 18 spend an average of seven and a half hours in front of screens each day. Annually, that adds up to over 100 full days watching a screen. Too much screen time can raise your child's risk for attention problems, anxiety and depression. It can also lead to a loss of social skills and less time for play.

There is a lot of advertising on TV, apps and other electronic screens. As a result of seeing all these advertisements, young children may have trouble telling the difference between advertising and factual information. Additionally, food advertising aimed at children is often for food high in sugar, salt or fats. Diets high in these types of foods have been linked to an increased risk of obesity.

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The American Academy of Pediatrics and the World Health Organization recommend the following:

- For children younger than 18 months, avoid screen time and the use of screen media other than video-chatting.

- For children ages two to five years, limit screen time to one hour per day of high-quality programs.

- For children ages six and older, place limits on the time spent using media and screens.

- Also limit the types of media. Make sure media does not take the place of adequate sleep, physical activity and other behaviors essential to health.

Develop screen time rules and healthy practices for adults and children.

At home:

- Create "tech-free" zones or times.

- Use parental controls to block or filter internet content.

- Co-view media with children to help them understand what they are seeing.

- Remove TVs, tablets or computers from bedrooms.

- Do not allow TV watching or screen use during meals or homework time.

- Replace screen time with activities that get your family interacting, moving and using energy. Go for a walk or play board games.

- Check if your phones, tablets or smart devices have tools to limit viewing time.

If you need to use screens to complete tasks, homework or while working:

- Take frequent breaks and stretch. If you work in front of a screen, make sure you take a break and look away at least every 30 minutes. Set alarms reminding you to take breaks.

- Stand up, stretch and move around. Back and neck stretches can help keep muscles loose. Learn "chair yoga" moves.

- Stand when you can.

- Pay attention to your posture.

- Do not eat in front of your computer. Take a lunch break away from your desk and computer screen.

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