

## **September 12, 2017 Digital eye strain a growing concern as children return to the classroom**

Dr. Tanya Sitter – children’s digital eye strain (*print*)

Sundre Round Up, Page 21

In addition to paper, pencils and binders, many back-to-school lists are starting to include laptops, tablets and other electronics. As children spend more time on digital devices at home and in the classroom, Alberta optometrists are encouraging parents to help protect their children from the effects of digital eye strain.

“We are seeing more children who are experiencing digital eye strain after using electronics for more than two hours at a time,” said Dr. Tanya Sitter, an optometrist in Sundre. “It’s caused by a number of factors, including staring at close-up objects for too long, a lack of blinking and exposure to blue light that’s emitted by electronics.”

The Alberta Association of Optometrists recently commissioned a survey to better understand children’s digital habits. According to the surveyed parents, Alberta elementary school age children spend an average of more than four hours a day using digital devices, while Alberta teenagers spend nearly eight hours a day using electronics.

While only 28 per cent of parents say their child experiences symptoms during or after using digital devices, Dr. Sitter points out that those symptoms can be difficult to detect.

“Sometimes children complain of things like headaches, blurred vision and eye irritation after using electronics,” said Dr. Sitter. “But many children don’t understand what they’re feeling, and end up with behavioural symptoms like irritability, poor behaviour and reduced attention spans, making it harder to pinpoint what’s causing the problem.”

Since 80 per cent of learning is visual, these symptoms have the potential to affect a child’s performance in school. Unfortunately, the survey revealed that 59 per cent of Alberta parents are not aware of or do not encourage their children to take steps during or after using digital devices to reduce the impact on their eyes. These steps include taking regular breaks, following the 20-20-20 rule by looking 20 feet away every 20 minutes for 20 seconds, not holding screens too close, reducing overhead lighting and screen brightness, and adjusting the position of their computers.

“The best way to prevent, treat and detect digital eye strain is through a comprehensive eye exam,” said Dr. Sitter. “We can recommend customized solutions, based on a child’s digital habits, which may include computer glasses or simple day-to-day lifestyle adjustments.”

Dr. Sitter says back-to-school season is a great time for parents to take their children for eye exams to ensure they have healthy eyes and clear vision before they get back in the classroom.

The Alberta Association of Optometrists recommends that children have at least one eye exam between the ages of two and five, and yearly after starting school. Infants should have their first eye exam between six and nine months of age. Alberta Health covers the cost of annual eye exams for children up to age 19.

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