

Give your computer a checkup

Too much screen time can cause everything from headaches and back pain to (yikes!) first-degree burns. The next time you log on, follow these tips for healthier high-tech habits.

By Mallory Creveling

Take a blink break

Suffering from dry eyes, blurry vision, or headaches? It could be “computer vision syndrome”—another name for spending long hours staring at your monitor. While you may not be able to shorten screen time during the workday, you can avoid symptoms by following the 20-20-20 rule: Every 20 minutes, pause to blink and gaze roughly 20 feet into the distance for 20 seconds, says Mina Massaro-Giordano, M.D., associate professor at the University of Pennsylvania Scheie Eye Institute. Reducing glare can also help: Do a “visor test” by cupping your hands over your eyes. If this improves your view, dim overhead lighting, dust the monitor, or affix an antiglare filter.

Check your brightness and contrast controls as well, since a display that’s too dark or too light can cause squinting and straining. Sit tall so that you’re looking down slightly as you work, Massaro-Giordano adds; this allows your eyelids to protect tear ducts from drying out. If irritability persists or you can’t read clearly, head to an ophthalmologist to see if new glasses are in order.

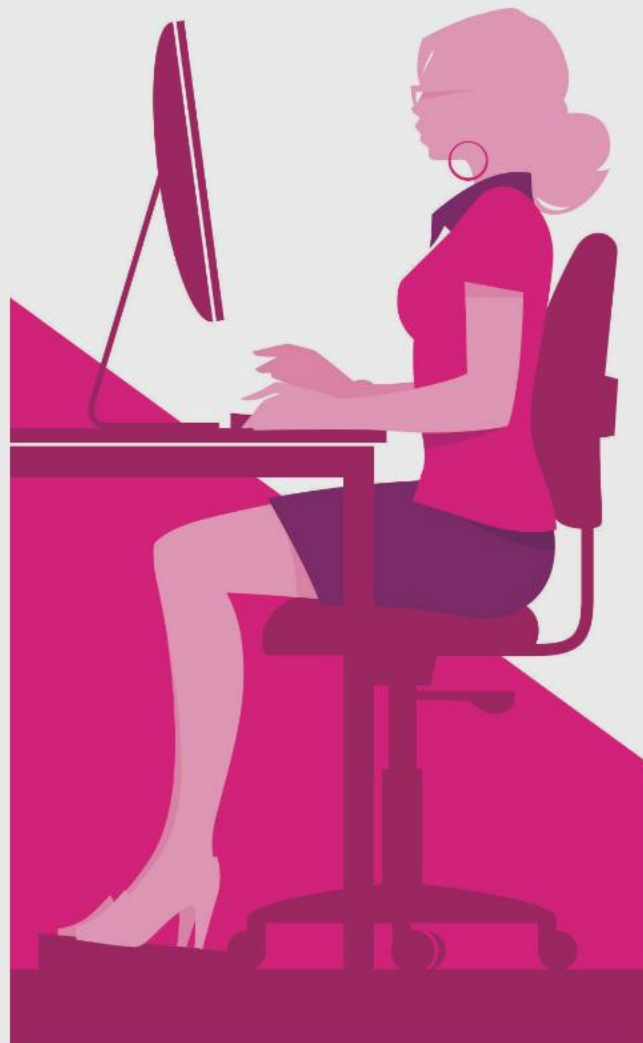
Set up properly

Position your monitor 14 inches from your face, your chin aligned with the center of the screen, recommends Wausau, WI-based chiropractor Scott Bautch, a spokesperson for the American Chiropractic Association. When you sit, use a footrest so your knees are slightly higher than your hips, and leave space between the back of your knees and the chair so you don’t cut off circulation to your lower half.

Upper-body posture is also important: Maintain a neutral spine by imagining a straight line between your hips, shoulders, and ears, and keep your elbows close to your sides and your mouse near your keyboard. Every 15 minutes or so, stand up and walk, do shoulder rolls, and open and close your hands for at least 15 seconds, says Bautch. “Even with perfect posture, we’re not meant to sit for too long.”

Keep it clean

Desktops and keyboards contain more germs than toilet seats, and these bugs can lead to illnesses like upset stomachs or the flu, says Charles Gerba, Ph.D., professor of microbiology and



THE RIGHT ANGLE: Keep your elbows at 90 degrees while typing.

environmental sciences at the University of Arizona. “People rarely sanitize these things, and because they’re personal spaces, janitors in offices don’t either,” he adds. Removing dust and crumbs and disinfecting them weekly (daily if you share with others) with antibacterial wipes will safeguard your health and may help prevent dirt-related mouse or keyboard malfunctions.

Stay cool

If you’re one of the 128 million Americans who own a laptop, avoid placing it

in direct contact with skin for prolonged periods of time. It’s rare, but the heat from these devices can cause first-degree burns, says Jill Waibel, M.D., clinical assistant professor of dermatology at Wright State University. Known as “toasted-skin syndrome,” this slightly increases the risk of skin cancer and can cause red spiderweb-like marks that may be permanent, she adds. Thin clothing won’t offer much protection, so place a lap desk between you and your machine.

Illustration by Paul Oakley