

# Limiting screen time boosts health

By Lori Kersey  
Staff writer

From cell phones and computers to television and tablets, our days are filled with screens. All those screens we look at — from video games and movies to checking emails — can cause eye strain. But there are ways to reduce the strain our eyes go through when we look at computers.

Dr. Travis Taylor, an optometrist at South Charleston Eye Care, said the extent of eye strain can be reduced by the position of our computer screens.

"You want to sit the monitor back as far as you can," Taylor said. "The closer it is the harder the eyes have to work."

Some people whose jobs require them to stare at computer screens all day may want to consider having a second pair of special glasses only for computer screens, he said. The lenses in these glasses are designed to focus on screens, he said.

Another tip is that after every 20 minutes or so of looking at a screen, look at something else for a couple minutes, Taylor said.

Taylor said that while looking at screens won't hurt your vision in the long term, it can cause headaches by the end of the day. This is true for students as well as workers.

"When kids have headaches at the end of the day they may be having eye strain," he said.

Taylor recommends children get an eye exam when they reach school age, or sooner if parents suspect there may be a problem.

Besides eye strain and headaches, looking at computers and television can cut into time we could use to be active and exercise. Experts at the National Institutes of Health recommend that aside from homework and work, people have no more than two hours of screen time each day.

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Research from the Henry J. Kaiser Foundation found that in 2010, children ages 8 to 10 spent approximately 7.5 hours of each day using entertainment media, 4.5 hours watching TV, 1.5 hours on the computer and more than an hour playing video games. That's much higher than the 25 minutes they reported reading books.

Kids and teenagers today also have more access to media in their bedrooms. More than one in three young people have a computer and Internet access in their rooms while half have video games and more than two out of three have TVs, according to the Henry J. Kaiser Foundation.

To limit screen time, the NIH recommends the following:

- Set a good example for your kids: if they see you limiting your screen time to two hours a day, they are more likely to do the same.
- Track how much time your family looks at screens compared to how much physical activity they're getting.
- Enforce a strict two-hour limit on screen time
- Don't put televisions or computers in your child's bedroom — kids with TVs in their room tend to spend more time watching them than those who don't.
- Provide your children with alternative activities to watching TV, such as playing outside.
- And don't use the TV or computer as a reward or punishment for your kids. Viewing it as a reward can make it seem more important to them.

# Patients get expert help by hiring advocates

By Barbara Sadick  
Special to The Washington Post

Stan and XuXia Smith learned from an ultrasound midway through the pregnancy that their son would be born with an often-fatal congenital heart defect. In the first week of the baby's life, they got more bad news: Some major organs were incorrectly formed and mislocated inside Travis' tiny body. They faced a long journey.

"I felt like I'd been hit by a tidal wave. I couldn't process the information I was being given fast enough, and I knew we'd need someone to help us translate and evaluate the enormous amount of information we were being bombarded with," said Stan Smith.

The Chicago couple hired Dan Polk, a patient advocate and retired neonatologist whose specialty is working with sick babies and their families. Polk helped the Smiths understand the complexity of their son's condition while building an experienced health care delivery team, and he has guided them through the intricacies of Travis' treatment. More than two years after his birth, he still has medical issues that require Polk's counsel.

"I was trained to take care of patients but found myself spending too much time away from the bedside," said Polk, who took up patient advocacy in 2013 after 35 years in practice. "Being an advocate for babies and parents has allowed me to do what I was trained to do: take care of patients."

Patient advocates for hire number perhaps 250 to 300 in the United States, according to Trisha Torrey, founder of the Alliance of Professional Health Advocates. Some of these advocates, such as Polk, have clinical backgrounds and know how to navigate the health care system. They may accompany patients to appointments and facilitate doctor-patient conversations in patient-friendly language. They may also handle tasks such as prepping for medical appointments, finding the right doctors and even deciphering medical bills and health insurance plans.

Advocates aren't cheap — their rates can start at \$100 an hour or more, depending on experience and credentials — and insurance doesn't cover them.

Stan Smith, 69, runs an economic and financial consulting firm. His wife, 41, takes care of Travis and their 5-year-old daughter, Blake Sarai TeiTei Smith. They have the resources to pay for a top-notch advocate.



Photo courtesy of Stan and XuXia Smith

Travis Smith, who was born with a serious heart defect, on an examination table at Boston Children's Hospital in December.

Polk's standard hourly fee is \$300, but his rates depend on the client and the situation. When he travels for out-of-town consultations and treatments, as he sometimes does with the Smiths, his daily rate is \$1,500 plus expenses.

Smith said advocates can sometimes help a client avoid unnecessary expenses that they might incur by going it alone.

"Without Dan, the doctors in Boston and Chicago never would have imagined that we'd be able to understand the level of complex information we asked for," he said. "But with Dan, we could not only travel at their speed and understand what was going on, we could collaborate in coming up with better solutions and pathways for care."

Physicians sometimes say complicated things, Polk said. Just because their words are heard doesn't mean they are understood. In the Smiths' case, he noted, 15-minute conversations with doctors often led to three-hour discussions with Polk to talk over what they meant.

Working with the Smiths, Polk constructed plans to address Travis' medical issues.

Preparations for repairing Travis' heart were among the most technically and emotionally challenging. The first step was to help the Smiths understand what was wrong and the solutions that might keep Travis alive. Then the parents had to decide who should perform the procedure and where. And for the surgery at Boston Children's Hospital, Polk accompanied the

parents to explain the operation as it unfolded.

"A good advocate must have the ability to evaluate complex medical situations, formulate a plan to address them, and implement it," Polk said.

That's not all. One lesson Polk learned is that there's a time to talk and a time to listen.

"Initially, listening is probably more important to understand the entirety of a situation, but at some point, you have to start to act," he said.

Polk helped the family avoid pitfalls. Once a doctor recommended that Travis get immediate surgery on an intestinal abnormality. Polk suggested the Smiths get another opinion. A second doctor suggested they wait and see. A third physician agreed, and so did Polk and the

Smiths. An immediate operation could have led to scar tissue that might have caused an intestinal blockage. "We can't say what would have been the result of a trip or fall, but we do know that many families who we met on the same journey have lost their children," Smith said.

Physicians also see value in patient advocates. Pedro del Nido, who operated on Travis' heart, praised Polk for applying his medical knowledge and communication skills to present information clearly and in a way that allowed for rational, thoughtful decisions.

Most doctors welcome advocates, said Sima Kahn, a patient advocate who is also an obstetrician and gynecologist in Seattle. "Doctors are so overworked that they ... seem thrilled to discover that people who do what I do exist and that I am part of a team that can take pressure off them."

When Keith Cotton was diagnosed with Stage 2 brain cancer two years ago, he and his wife hired Kahn. She helped them find the best specialists, discover options and ask the questions that they didn't know to ask themselves.

After Cotton had a tumor removed, he wasn't sure he wanted chemotherapy and radiation, but Kahn helped him to see the benefits. "I realize now that not having the treatment would have been a bad idea," said Cotton, 39, whose wife, Megan, gave birth to their first child, Grace, in June.

Finding advocates such as Polk and Kahn isn't always easy. Teri Dreher, the founder of North Shore Patient Advocates in Chicago, recommends weighing an advocate's educational and practical experience. Someone with complicated health issues might benefit from an advocate with a medical or nursing background. And advocates who lack clinical backgrounds may have personal experiences that make them excellent choices.

Advocates can help patients make better decisions, said Torrey of the Alliance of Professional Health Advocates.

"When you don't know what you don't know, you don't know what questions to ask, and that's when a patient advocate can be indispensable," she said.

The Smiths celebrated Travis' improving health and the new year at Disney World. Stan Smith says his son's neurologist has told them that Travis should be back on track in his mental and physical development next year.

# Physicians, patients need to work on healthy dialogue

By Elaine Rogers  
The News-Sentinel (Fort Wayne, Ind.)

So, there's that daily Facebook newsfeed and its bombardment of provocative promises about the curative powers of everything from pet ownership to meditation.

Meanwhile, five minutes spent tuned in to what Dr. Oz is talking about is sure to add another superfood, spice or yoga stretch to your ever-expanding arsenal of nutraceuticals and hoping-they're-healthy habits.

It's easy to see why most of us get confused about what we ought to be eating, taking or doing to optimize our health — and to know when or if to bring our family doctors in on the conversation.

## Help yourself

According to studies from the National Institutes of Health, a third of Americans seek help for their health outside of their doctor's office, although most do so as a complement to conventional care — not as a replacement for it.

And the U.S. National Center

for Health Statistics (NCHS) reports that 18 percent of Americans use herbal supplements, more than double that of the next-most-popular complementary medicines — chiropractic and osteopathic manipulation (8.5 percent) and yoga (8.4 percent).

In addition, the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health says that 92 percent of Americans believe massage therapy is an effective treatment for reducing pain, while 74 percent agree it should be considered a form of health-care.

"People are highly motivated now to try to stay healthy by taking vitamins, herbs and nutraceuticals or by seeking out complementary and alternative medical treatments," says Dr. Darrin D'Agostino, chair of the department of internal medicine at the University of North Texas Health Science Center at Fort Worth.

"That's a good thing. But they also need to be taught to tell their doctors what vitamins they're taking," D'Agostino says. "It's important, because it's very easy to have drug interactions

when those conversations aren't taking place."

Theresa Hocker, executive director of the Alzheimer's Association North Central Texas chapter (www.alz.org/northcentraltexas)

"It can make them desperate to try anything. There is no cure for this disease, so we really encourage people that whatever new things they take or treatments they pursue, that they make sure their doctors know about it. You just never know what might interact with what."

## Prescribing wellness

D'Agostino is among a growing branch of physicians practicing what is called integrative medicine, acknowledging the merits of healing traditions like acupuncture, massage therapy, yoga and nutrition — termed complementary and alternate medicine (CAM) in medical circles — and actively incorporating them into their patients' treatment plans.

He and others say that integrative medicine and the concept of "treating the whole person rather than just the symptoms of illness" is becoming

more mainstream, and even conventional physicians are increasingly more likely to discuss the nutraceuticals and wellness therapies patients have already prescribed for themselves, or to make suggestions about CAM treatments they might pursue.

"I believe there is a benefit with integrating complementary and alternative medical treatments such as nutrition, exercise, yoga, massage, etc., into traditional/conventional medical practices," says Dr. Lea Krekow, an oncologist at Texas Breast Specialists-Bedford and Texas Oncology's Bedford and Grapevine locations. "Wellness is more than just the absence of disease."

Dr. Trisha Smith, an internist with Baylor Family Medicine at Highland Village, explains that integrative medicine is about

combining the best of both worlds.

"Traditional medicine, unfortunately, does focus on treating disease, and most alternative medical systems focus on tapping into the innate healing powers of the human body," she says. "More and more we are seeing a trend in traditional medicine towards prevention and wellness."

## Personal touch

Integrative medical practitioners may keep registered dietitians on their staffs to provide nutritional counseling, or they might recommend alternative therapeutic approaches like massage therapy or acupuncture as complementary treatments to their conventional care.

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