

Written by Michael G. Richie, M.D.

Does Reading This Newspaper Give You a Headache?

Now that I have your attention, did you know that one of the leading causes of headaches is eyestrain? I don't know about you, but having eyestrain makes me grumpy and ornery. I would most certainly not want you, my fellow reader, to experience that sort of anguish. In today's world, with the increase of technology (i.e. iPods, computers, cell phones, etc.) and the reduced size of print media, there is greater stress placed on our visual system. Now, let's try to get to the bottom of this issue and resolve it. It's time to lay down the facts.

Headaches caused by eyestrain have a distinct pattern. They will usually worsen as the day progresses. At the beginning of your school or work week, a vision headache may appear by mid to late afternoon. By the end of the week, you may be just about ready to pull your hair out with the continuation of headaches which may start by mid morning or present as a dull ache from the day before even after a full nights sleep. Many times headaches disappear on the weekends or extended breaks only to appear again upon return to school or work. My word, just informing you all of this is frustrating to me. Let's get to the bottom of this!

What are the causes of eyestrain that lead to vision headaches? A difference in refractive error between the eyes involving any combination of myopia (nearsightedness), hyperopia (farsightedness), astigmatism (blurred vision), presbyopia (age related loss of focusing), or a vertical muscle imbalance may lead to eyestrain. If the eyes are not in proper alignment and focus, eyestrain can occur with activities such as reading or computer use. Another major cause of eyestrain is trauma. A serious fall or head injury from a car accident may lead to a change in alignment of the eyes, resulting in headaches or double vision.

Vision headaches usually don't respond to over-the-counter pain medications such as Tylenol or Motrin. Additional symptoms may include difficulty focusing when reading for extended periods, losing your place while reading, skipping words or rereading sentences, or just being frustrated at trying to read the house number of your best friend. You may even suffer from motion sickness when riding in a car. All of these symptoms may occur even if you have 20/20 vision.

Folks, this may seem like a downer, but you have nothing to fear. If you experience frequent headaches or any of these associated symptoms, a comprehensive eye examination should be scheduled with an optometrist. So what are you waiting for? Open your eyes, and together, let us eliminate eyestrain one checkup at a time.

Dr. Murray Hanson can be reached at the Richie Eye Clinic, 332-9900.