

People are increasingly embracing digital electronic products as necessities of daily life. But many studies have found improper use of them can damage our health. How can we enjoy these modern gadgets without being harmed by them?

HONG KONG parents are letting their children use digital screen devices at an increasingly young age. Some may think it is good training in IT skills, others may do so because their children just like these devices.

Children are fascinated by the colourful moving images on the easy-to-operate touchscreens and attracted by the cute sound effects. They will engage with these devices for hours without ‘bothering’ their parents.

Seeing such **captivating** effects, some parents even use smartphones and tablets as if they are pacifiers. This is a very irresponsible practice. Children may seem happy and content when playing with these devices, but their health could suffer.

Amid growing concerns, the Health Department formed the Advisory Group on the Health Effects of Use of Internet and Electronic Screen Products. It recently published its report, and the findings are far from comforting.

### Tablets for toddlers

THE study found the median age of pre-school kids who watch television is eight months old.

By 16 months, toddlers have started using tablet devices, before graduating to computers by age two. The youngest electronic screen product user was only one month old!

Only 14 percent and 12 percent of parents keep their children company when they are using tablets and computers respectively.

The study also found 20 percent of primary students use a computer for more than three hours a day, even as 50 percent of parents believe their children are using computers too much.

Parents note that **prolonged** computer usage has **encroached** on the normal daily lives of their children, and 64 percent of them have had frequent conflicts with their children over the use of digital electronic products.

About 37 percent of students admit they would give up outdoor activities for computer time, and close to half say using these products has cut into their sleep hours and affected their schoolwork.

### Bad eyesight, unhealthy posture and obesity

**EXCESSIVE** use of electronic screen products can harm the health of young users in many ways.

Children’s eyeball development can be **hampered** if they start using these products too early.

A Chinese University of Hong Kong study found more children between the ages of two and six have myopia – rising from 2.6 percent in 1996 to 6.3 percent in 2006 – and the trend was linked to screen product usage.

Serious myopia can cause conditions such as macular degeneration or glaucoma, which can lead to blindness.



The advisory group pointed out that staring at a screen for a long time can cause visual symptoms like ocular discomfort, eyestrain, dry eye, headache, blurred vision and even double vision. Since IT screen product usage is becoming more prevalent, the problem could worsen further.

Another health effect related to screen product use identified by the advisory group is bad body posture causing damage to tendons and muscles.

The group also agreed that sitting before a screen could lead to obesity, due to a sedentary lifestyle and other associated behaviours, like snacking and decreased sleep time.

### Psychological effects

IMPROPER use of electronic screen products could also have a bad effect on the psychological well-being of the users.

Many people are so reliant on smartphones and tablets for socialising that they feel **compelled** to check for new messages every few minutes. This condition is so serious that it has even got a name: FOMO – Fear Of Missing Out.

Scientific studies found that overindulgence in virtual networking could harm the development of social skills in the real world.

### Digital detox

THE attachment to electronic screen products can be so serious that it becomes an addiction, and there are even special facilities to treat the condition. The term ‘detox’ is used to refer to the process

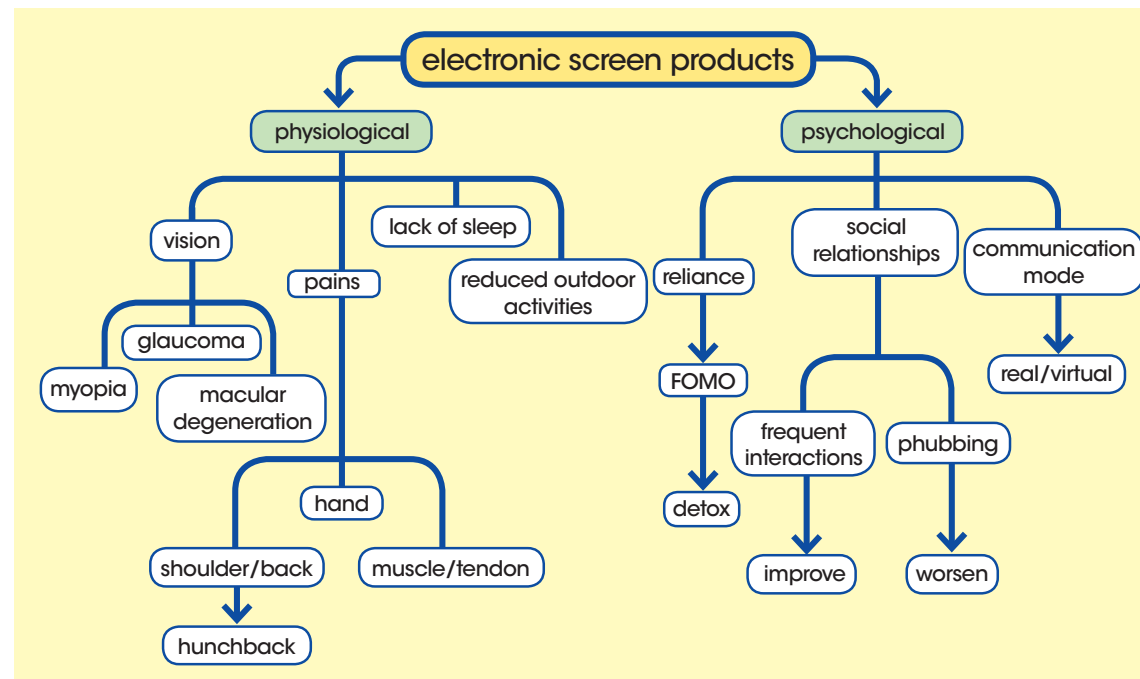
of cleansing the body of drugs, alcohol or other toxins. Now it is also employed in computer product usage, and is referred to as ‘digital detox’.

Like any health issue, early detection helps treatment. To help people detect addiction to smartphones, the University of Bonn in Germany has developed a new app, Mental, which tracks people’s patterns of usage.

### The ultimate irony

IT is ironic that parents who impose strict **restrictions** on their children in the use of screen products are often those in the IT business. The late founder of Apple, Steve Jobs, did not allow family members to use digital products at dinner time, reserving it for conversation on interesting subjects.

Digital products enrich our lives and make communication more efficient and **convenient**. But we must be aware of their potential dangers, and exercise self-discipline so that we do not become their slaves. 🐼



### Key ideas:

The improper use of digital devices such as smartphones, tablets and computers is creating health problems, both in children and adults. Apart from physiological issues such as the increased chance of myopia, there are also psychological effects, such as addictive usage. We must be aware of these dangers and exercise restraint and care when using these devices.

### Did you know?

Vision-related problems related to prolonged computer use are called Computer Vision Syndrome (CVS). Common conditions include eyestrain, blurred vision and dry eye. Factors leading to these symptoms include poor lighting, glare from the computer screen, improper viewing distances, or uncorrected vision problems.

### Critical Questions:

1. Do you have self-control in the use of smartphones and computers?
2. Have you ever had an argument with your parents over the use of these devices?

### References:

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