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Blue Light - Sleepless Night?

The dangers of LED screens at bedtime

Computers are an accepted part of life. Workers and students, retirees and pensioners, all sit in front of monitor screens, big and small, for hours at a time, day and night. Even young children play games on their tablets. Does it really matter? According to some medical research, there are subtle dangers users may not be aware of that are affecting their health.

LED screens, whether they be TV, desktop or hand-held, emit blue light. This light is nothing new. It is present in natural sunlight in massive doses compared to that radiating from a mobile device; and exposure to it at the right time is quite healthy. Blue light suppresses the body's production of Melatonin, a hormone that helps regulate sleep patterns. That seems okay during the day, but at bedtime it's a different matter. Exposure to blue light late in the evening could play havoc with any healthy routine. That's because darkness is a natural cue to our bodies that it's time for sleep; whereas blue light, according to the experts, tells our brain that it isn't!

If the body's production of Melatonin is suppressed, it is harder to fall asleep; and when eventually sleep is achieved, the quality of this necessary rest period can be compromised. Two groups of people were used to test the difference between reading an ordinary paper-type book at bedtime as opposed to an electronic eReader. Despite having the same amount of sleep as the paper-book readers, those with the eReaders reported feeling more tired in the morning. Over a period, lack of proper sleep can be detrimental and has been linked to "mood problems, anxiety and depression, and increased risk of accidents." On the plus side, blue-light therapy has been used to tackle sleep disorders by altering sleep patterns.

Based on research, it is advisable to reduce the amount of blue-light exposure approaching and immediately before going to bed. One source claims that 90 minutes is a good span, while another believed half an hour of gadget-free time is sufficient to promote a good night's sleep. Unfortunately, that may be difficult in the modern home. Instead of the old incandescent bulbs, we now have LED lights, all producing Melatonin-suppressing blue light; and the stronger and brighter they are, the more they keep us awake. So, what to do about it?

From the point of view of the home environment, a combination of light sources would be ideal - softer, incandescent globes in bedrooms and relaxation areas; brighter LED's in kitchens and bathrooms. If only LED's are available, fitting dimmer switches can reduce the amount of blue-light exposure. The TV, in my opinion, doesn't pose a problem, seeing as I tend to fall asleep in front of it, no matter how captivating or exciting the program. However, laptops, iPads, smartphones and eReaders need special consideration; and not just because of the blue-light factor.

Staring at the screen of these devices for any length of time not only subjects the user to excessive blue-light, but also stimulates brain activity. Video games require concentration. Those played on-line with other gamers add the element of psychological

strategy: the need to support seemingly loyal compatriots, always in the knowledge that the odd one might be contemplating betrayal; and then there's the overall desire to win. Here's where the metabolism produces other chemicals like Adrenaline and Dopa, stimulants a person does not need just before going to sleep - or trying to. Fired up by M.A.D (a combo of less Melatonin, along with increased Adrenaline and Dopa) the brain can't simply shut down in an instant. It keeps going over successes and failures; poor decisions and how to correct them next time; and sometimes how to get back at another adversary, or even the game itself! And don't believe a few "harmless" texts and tweets to friends are an ideal precursor to sleep, especially when these back-and-forth chat sessions can go on for hours. The best option is to switch these things off; especially phones: otherwise further messages are likely to come in at any time.

For those who feel they have no option but to soldier on, working (or playing) into the wee small hours, there are, apparently, light filters and software apps available which might be worth researching. As for the kids, don't even consider this as an option. If necessary, confiscate their devices until next morning - you'll be doing them and yourself a favour.

For everyone in general: switch off all the blue-light screens well before bedtime, then awake refreshed next morning to duck outside and soak up fifteen minutes of natural sunlight. That should set you up for the coming day, hopefully a good one.

And if it all seems too inconvenient, may I suggest you ponder which is more important - the small, short-term LED screen of enjoyment, or the big, longer lasting picture of life?

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