

Benefits Spotlight

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Expert Q&A: Screen Time and Kids' Vision

When it comes to screens and kids' vision, let's cut to the chase: Do you need to eliminate screens from your kids' daily routine? The answer is no.

But too much screen time can harm your children's eyes. Here, Delta Dental of Iowa spoke with its director of vision benefits, Dr. Chad Overman, about the connection between screen time and kids' eye health.

Q: Can screen time harm kids' vision?

Dr. Overman: Yes, screen time can harm a child's vision just like it does to adults. We are seeing more and more kids experiencing problems that we've traditionally seen only in adults, such as dry eye and focusing problems. That doesn't mean parents need to eliminate tablets, phones and television from their children's lives. However, I recommend keeping an eye on how much time your child is spending in front of a screen and limiting it, if necessary.

Q: Are blue light filters a possible solution for lessening screen time damage?

Dr. Overman: When you're looking at computer screens and other digital devices that emit significant amounts of blue light, this unfocused visual "noise" reduces contrast and can cause digital eye strain. The same goes for anti-reflective screens, as the glare causes the eyes to strain.

Yes, blue light filters are helpful in reducing eye problems from screens, but I wouldn't say they "solve" the screen overuse problem. In addition to blue light filters, anti-reflective screens can help reduce eye strain.

But, again, these products shouldn't be viewed as solutions—they help reduce eye problems and can help to prevent eye issues if your child is spending hours in front of a screen each day.

Q: What are the best practices for children to use screens safely (ie, how far away they should be from the screen, how much they should be viewing, etc.)?

Dr. Overman: I recommend keeping portable screens (like tablets and phones) at a normal reading distance (slight bend at elbow). Remind your child to blink often to keep eyes moisturized.

Also, monitor how long your child has been in front of the screen. Kids are on devices more than many adults. Schools hand out computers for schoolwork, and kids are on their phones and use screens for video games—this makes limiting the hours on screens per day a challenge.

Q: What advice do you have for parents who are concerned about screen time and its effects on their children's vision?

Dr. Overman: Monitor and reduce your child's time in front of a screen, when possible. I know parents struggle with finding ways to entertain their children—and the COVID-19 pandemic has certainly made it even more challenging. But screens aren't the only way to keep kids occupied: finding outdoor activities or reading a paper book are excellent options to explore.

It is so difficult as a parent to get our kids away from digital devices, but their eyes will be better off for it.

Your New Fall Favorite Recipe: Vegetarian Pumpkin Chili

Perhaps no two words capture the classic festive flavors of fall better than “pumpkin” and “chili.” As the temperatures dial down in Iowa and plump gourds begin to speckle fields and doorsteps across the state, you know it's time to cook up some classic autumn fare like this vegetarian pumpkin chili. Plus, it packs in several mouth-friendly nutrients.

Let's start with the pumpkin: It contains vitamins A and C, two antioxidants that help prevent infections in your mouth. Vitamin C also supports gum health, and vitamin A boosts bone and teeth health. This recipe also contains red peppers, another excellent source of vitamin C. Carrots add more vitamin A to the mix, along with some fiber. And speaking of fiber, antioxidant-rich kidney beans contribute a healthy helping of vitamin B to reduce inflammation.

A dish that tastes good and supports your oral health? A second bowl may be in order.

Ingredients:

2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
1 onion, diced
1 teaspoon salt
1 cup carrots, diced
1 red bell pepper, cored and chopped
3 cloves garlic, minced
1 tablespoon chili powder
1 tablespoon cumin
1 teaspoon smoked paprika
1 teaspoon oregano
2 tablespoons tomato paste
1 can pumpkin puree (15 ounces)
1 can tomato sauce (8 ounces)
2 cans kidney beans, drained and rinsed (15 ounces each)
1 cup frozen corn kernels
1/2 cup vegetable broth
Optional toppings: sliced avocado, fresh cilantro, shredded cheddar cheese, sour cream, crushed red pepper

Directions:

In a large pot, warm olive oil over medium heat.

Put onion and salt into pot. Sauté until onion is softened.

Add carrots, red bell pepper and garlic. Continue sautéing for 2 minutes.

Combine chili powder, cumin, smoked paprika, oregano and tomato paste with other ingredients in pot. Stir until all veggies are coated and cook for 2 more minutes.

Add pumpkin puree, tomato sauce, kidney beans, corn and vegetable broth. Stir to combine.

Bring chili to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer for 10 to 20 minutes.

Taste and add more salt or spices, if needed.

Top with your favorite garnishes and enjoy!