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Ageing under the digital glow: Screen time challenges and homoeopathic role

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Abstract

Digital technology plays an important role in the lives of older adults by supporting communication, information access, and healthcare needs. However, excessive screen time can adversely affect physical health, mental well-being, and cognitive function in the elderly, increasing the risk of eye strain, sleep disturbance, musculoskeletal discomfort, emotional stress, sedentary behaviour, and social isolation. This article reviews the growing use of screens among older adults, its health impacts, and the importance of healthy digital habits. It also highlights the supportive role of homoeopathic management in addressing screen-related complaints through individualized care, emphasizing the need for a balanced and holistic approach to healthy ageing in the digital era.

Keywords: Screen time, elderly/older adults, eye strain, sleep disturbance, cognitive health, emotional stress, mental well-being, homeopathic management, stress management, healthy digital habits

Introduction

Screen time has become a major issue for people and families in the contemporary digital era. Screens have become an unavoidable component of daily life for toddlers viewing cartoons, teenagers endlessly scrolling through social media, professionals working long hours on laptops, or seniors staying connected through video calls and online platforms.

Older adults often use screens to keep in touch with relatives, obtain information, or arrange doctor visits. Although these benefits are considerable, too much screen exposure can cause eye tiredness, poor posture, and less exercise. Setting balance lets seniors use technology while yet maintaining their welfare.

The right amount of screen time varies according to age and intended use. Medical rules emphasize that screen time should never replace basic needs including sleep, nutrition, physical activity, and social interaction ^[1].

Too much screen time is connected to inactivity, anxiety, and sleep problems. Therefore, it's absolutely vital to balance it with content awareness, restrictions, and screen-free activities that can be controlled with built-in device tools or applications ^[2].

What is screen time

Screen time is the total of time spent using smartphones, televisions, computers-including both active usage (learning, connecting) and passive consumption (scrolling, watching) ^[2].

Types of Screen Use

Active consumption means the elderly person engaging with the content and making direct contact with others; for example, by commenting on a picture ^[3].

Generally speaking, increased cognitive performance was associated with active screen use, such as problem solving, interactive tasks, and learning activities, particularly

- Memory and Recollection.
- Executive functioning.
- Attention ^[4].

Passive consumption of social media means that an elderly person views and scrolls through content without interacting with others ^[3]

More passive screen time (e.g., watching TV excessively and passive scrolling) had lower

cognitive outcomes, including decline in:

- Verbal recall
- Overall cognitive function ^[4]

Healthy screen time habits for seniors

- Use screens with awareness, making sure to adjust the brightness, loudness, and font size for comfort.
- Set time restrictions for screen use and steer clear of prolonged, continuous use.
- Strike a balance between your internet activities and physical activities like yoga, strolling, or gentle stretching.
- To avoid isolation, promote face-to-face relationships, social clubs, neighbourhood events, and family visits.
- To improve posture and give your eyes a break, take frequent rests.
- Investigate offline hobbies that promote cognitive wellbeing, such as knitting, gardening, or music.
- Track your time using digital wellbeing tools, but don't get overly reliant.
- Seek advice from a local mental health professional if you're experiencing stress, loneliness, or excessive use of technology ^[1].

Psychiatric perspective on excessive screen time in the elderly

According to psychiatry, excessive screen use is not merely a lifestyle choice but also a possible risk factor for mental illness, especially when it replaces sleep, physical activity, and in-person social interaction, all of which are essential for mental stability.

In a large prospective cohort study utilizing the UK Biobank, it was discovered that adults (including middle-aged and older groups) who spent more than 5 hours per day watching television had a considerably higher risk of acquiring mental illnesses than those who watched television for less than one hour each day ^[5].

Excessive screen use might result in reduced face-to-face contact, social interaction and less physical activities, both of which are protective factors for mental wellbeing. Loneliness and a lack of meaningful connection, which are frequently linked to excessive screen usage, are recognized by psychiatry as significant risk factors for depression and anxiety in older persons ^[6].

Incidence and Prevalence

Globally

- About three-quarters of persons above 65 used the internet in 2018, an astounding increase from the 14% recorded in 2000 ^[7].
- Around 65% of seniors said they spent over three hours each day in front of a screen (e.g., computer, television) ^[8].
- A majority of elderly people watch more than two hours of television every day, while almost 60% sit for more than four hours total ^[8].

India

Access to digital devices

- 41% of seniors stated they had access to at least one digital device.
- The most used gadget among seniors was smartphones at 39%.

Gender inequalities in the digital world

- Around 48% of older men had digital device access.
- Only 33% of elderly women had access.

Online participation and screen time

- For social networking and amusement, 34% of seniors used digital devices often.
- 12% of people paid utility bills or utilized internet banking through digital channels.
- Only 1.5% of those polled said that they employed digital tools for telemedicine therapies ^[9].

Why screen time is increasing in elderly

- **Loneliness and Social Isolation:** Among the main causes older people spend more time in front of screens are loneliness and a lack of frequent social activity. Many older adults live alone after retirement, divorce, death or separation of family members or friends. Televisions and gadgets become friends as they help to fill the silent hours and give a feeling of presence or link.
- **Retirement and Additional free time:** Usually, people's days following retirement have more spare time. Screens may easily replace time formerly devoted to professional obligations or an active social life in the absence of work or a packed social calendar.
- **Background Entertainment and Routine:** Much of the time that older people spend in front of screens is due to the fact that they watch television while engaging in other activities. The mere presence of the screen increases their total daily screen exposure, even when they aren't constantly paying attention.
- **Restricted movement or physical limitations:** Physical health issues, mobility challenges, or other age-related limitations sometimes make it more challenging for seniors to go out or engage in social events needing physical activity. After that, displays turn into the primary means of amusement or entertainment.
- **Rising use of technology:** Many elderly people now use the internet, digital platforms, and smartphones in contrast to earlier stereotypes. People over 65's Internet use has surged dramatically in recent years, therefore giving them more opportunities to use screens for activities like surfing, video chats, and streaming ^[7].
- **Ease and Quick Service Access:** Older individuals are also increasingly using screens for practical needs, including online buying, accessing health information, texting family members, or watching videos. Maintaining contact especially when family members live far from one another depends on digital communication.
- **Methods for Managing boredom:** For many seniors, especially those with busy schedules or less interesting activities, screens provide instant entertainment in the form of movies, news, religious stuff, games, or social networking apps, therefore helping them to get through long days ^[10].

Negative impacts of excessive screen use

Physical health impacts

- **Sedentary behaviour & physical decline:** Spending a lot of time in front of a TV or other screen-based device

usually results in more sitting and less exercise. Regardless of physical activity levels, this sedentary lifestyle is associated with poorer mobility, functional limitations, and higher frailty in older people ^[11].

- **Poor balance & increased fall risk:** According to study, excessive screen usage outside of work (such as TV, tablets, etc.) is associated with balance issues in middle-aged and older adults. Poor balance increases the chance of falls and associated injuries, which are particularly hazardous in older adults ^[12].
- **Eye strain and vision issues:** Due to age-related eye changes and a reduced frequency of blinking when looking at screens, older people are more susceptible to digital eye strain, which includes symptoms like dry, itchy eyes, blurred vision, and headaches. These symptoms are exacerbated by excessive screen use ^[13].
- **Sleep disruption:** Blue light, which is emitted by screen exposure, especially before bed, interferes with circadian rhythms, or the body's sleep-wake cycle. This may result in insomnia or bad sleep quality, which has an impact on the general health and energy levels of the elderly ^[13].

Effects on Mental Health

- **Higher risk of poor mental well-being:** When combined with loneliness, high personal screen time (such as more than 5 hours daily) increases the likelihood of poor mental health, low life satisfaction, and a diminished sense of purpose ^[14].
- **Increased risk of depressive symptoms & mood issues:** A greater chance of experiencing mental health issues, such as depressive symptoms, is linked to prolonged screen exposure, especially passive viewing such as lengthy television sessions. It may also combine with insufficient sleep and low activity to increase the risk of mental illness ^[5].
- **Mental fatigue & reduced engagement:** Excessive passive screen use may lead to mental exhaustion, disengagement from active interests, and reduced drive to engage in mentally stimulating activities, all of which are crucial for healthy aging, although this effect is widely researched across adults, not just the elderly ^[15].

Societal and Lifestyle Effects

- **Reduced real-world social interaction:** Spending a lot of time in front of a screen rather than interacting with family, friends, or the community in person can lead to social isolation, which can lower mood and cognitive function. Loneliness coupled with excessive screen time increases the likelihood of experiencing poor mental health ^[14].
- **Disruption of daily routines:** Spending too much time in front of screens might unintentionally take precedence over essential daily tasks like socializing, exercise, errands, walking, and hobbies all of which are crucial to healthy aging and general well-being ^[14].

Digital Impacts

- **Risks to digital privacy:** If seniors are not familiar with online safety procedures, their personal information may be compromised or misused.

- **Exposure to potentially dangerous material:** False news, fraudulent messages, or inappropriate content might induce confusion or anxiety.
- **Over-reliance on technology for critical services:** If technology breaks down, the elderly may be unable to use banking, healthcare or government services ^[16].

The reasons why the elderly are vulnerable

- Low level of digital literacy
- Trust in authority figures
- Manipulation based on fear
- Social isolation ^[16]

Effects of Digital Trauma

Digital and financial scams can have serious and lasting effects on older adults' mental health. Victims often experience anxiety, fear, stress, shame, and depression, which can lead to social withdrawal, isolation, and reduced self-esteem. Prolonged mental distress may also cause physical symptoms such as headaches, sleep problems, and fatigue, creating a vicious cycle that affects overall well-being ^[17].

Management

The dangers of excessive screen time, even if frequently linked to younger generations, also affect older individuals. Spending too much time on computers, phones, and other gadgets can lead to a variety of health issues in seniors, such as obesity and cardiovascular disease, eye strain and vision problems, sleep disturbances, social isolation, and cognitive decline. Here are some strategies to help manage screen time, bearing in mind these risks:

- **Establish boundaries:** Set a strict time limit for the use of electronic gadgets such as computers, tablets, and smartphones. To avoid overusing screens, set aside specific times for screen time and stick to them. Since the blue light produced by electronic devices has been demonstrated to disrupt sleep patterns, stay away from screen time just before going to bed.
- **Set priorities for your tasks:** Prioritize activities that offer meaningful engagement over passive screen time. Make time for offline interests, exercise, and socializing in order to live a balanced life.
- **Make good use of technology:** Use technology to improve productivity and connection with friends and family. Be aware of its risks! Minimize distractions by turning off notifications.
- **Take a break:** To avoid eye strain, weariness, and mental weariness, integrate frequent breaks into screen time sessions. Take breaks to stretch, walk, or unwind in order to revitalize the mind and body.

Older people may successfully regulate their screen time and find a healthy balance between digital involvement and offline activities by using these techniques, which will result in greater well-being and a higher overall quality of life ^[18].

Homoeopathic Management ^[19]

Digital eye strain/computer vision syndrome

Burning, dry eyes, impaired vision, eye fatigue, and a sense of heaviness in the eyes.

- **Nux Vomica:** Evidence of eye strain caused by prolonged close work or screen exposure. Eye

exhaustion, burning, and hazy vision are all signs. After using a screen late at night or engaging in excessive mental activity, patients may experience worsening symptoms, irritability, excessive thinking, and increased sensitivity to light and sound.

- **Gelsemium:** Helpful when digital eye strain is accompanied by heavy eyelids, a sense of droopiness, hazy vision, and overall muscle weakness. Frequently seen in older adults who suffer from performance anxiety, anticipatory stress, or nervous weariness brought on by excessive screen use.
- **Argentum Nitricum:** Recommended for use in cases of visual weariness brought on by anxiety, tremulousness, and stress. Patients may have eye strain exacerbated by emotional stress or performance pressure, as well as difficulties concentrating and rapid mental tiredness.
- **Euphrasia:** Mainly used in conditions where conjunctival discomfort is the primary symptom. The symptoms include burning, excessive tearing of the eyes, and discomfort that is made worse by exposure to light, particularly after extended screen use.

Headaches due to excessive screen usage

Photophobia, pounding discomfort, a feeling of pressure, tension headaches.

- **Belladonna:** Signaled by the abrupt onset of severe, throbbing headaches accompanied by extreme sensitivity to light and sound. Bright screens can sometimes make headaches worse, while resting in a calm, dark place can help alleviate them.
- **Bryonia:** Helpful for headaches made worse by even the smallest movement. Pain is usually pressing or bursting in nature, and it is frequently accompanied by dryness and exhaustion. Patients want complete rest and the least amount of stimulation possible.
- **Spigelia:** Frequently found behind or around one eye, this is a sign of intense, unilateral, neuralgic head pain. Eye motions or extended screen attention frequently make the pain worse, which can be sharp, stabbing, or spreading.

Sleep disturbance due to night-time screen exposure

Trouble falling asleep, excessive mental activity, and unrefreshing sleep

- **Coffea Cruda:** When sleeplessness is brought on by overexcitement of the mind, it is indicated. After prolonged screen usage, notably at night, individuals may have racing thoughts, increased vigilance, and difficulty unwinding.
- **Kali Phosphoricum:** A traditional treatment for nervous and mental exhaustion. Beneficial for older adults who have trouble sleeping as a result of prolonged mental stress, screen fatigue, emotional distress, and overall frailty.
- **Nux Vomica:** Also applicable when sleep disruption is linked to excessive device usage at night, erratic schedules, excessive mental labor, digestive problems, and irritability.

Musculoskeletal Strain

Neck stiffness, shoulder pain, upper back discomfort due to posture.

- **Rhus toxicodendron:** Symptoms include neck, shoulder, and back stiffness and pain, particularly following extended sitting or improper posture. The symptoms worsen at first and then get better with sustained light exercise.
- **Bryonia Alba:** Helpful in situations where movement makes musculoskeletal discomfort worse while rest makes it better. Prolonged static postures while using a screen can cause pain that can be stabbing, stitching, or aching.
- **Arnica montana:** It is used where muscles have been overworked, bruised, and sore after prolonged exertion or strain. Prolonged sitting causes the affected muscles to feel generally tired and sensitive.
- **Ruta graveolens:** Helpful for treating pain and stiffness in the tendons and ligaments that are brought on by overuse and postural stress. Especially helpful when persistent poor posture results in pain in the neck and upper back.

Anxiety, Irritability and Cognitive Overload

(Mental fatigue, emotional sensitivity, irritability from prolonged screen exposure)

- **Phosphorus:** Signs include vivid dreams, emotional sensitivity, sensory overload, and mental weariness. Long usage of screens might leave patients feeling depleted, yet they are still highly attentive and responsive to outside events.
- **Ignatia Amara:** Helpful for nervous tension, irritability, abrupt mood swings, and severe emotional distress. Particularly helpful in situations where prolonged screen time aggravates emotional instability, repressed sadness, or excessive sighing.
- **Kali Phosphoricum:** Serves as a nerve tonic for persistent mental weariness and exhaustion. Weak memory, impatience, and difficulty focusing are all symptoms that Boericke lists. It's particularly helpful for seniors who are experiencing mental exhaustion and cognitive overload as a result of too much exposure to technology.
- **Gelsemium:** Shown when mental exhaustion is accompanied by dullness, heaviness, and anticipatory anxiety. Gelsemium is a good option since screen-induced cognitive stress can cause dullness, concentration problems, and mental sluggishness.
- **Arsenicum Album:** helpful for those who experience anxiety, restlessness, and overthinking after extended screen time. Patients can experience a range of emotions, including anxiety, worry, and emotional turmoil, along with irritability that increases under mental stress.

Conclusion

Although digital screens are a useful tool for older adults, too much screen time can have negative effects on their mental and physical health. Excessive and passive screen usage can lead to eye strain, insomnia, psychological distress, mental exhaustion, and social isolation. Maintaining balance with offline activities, encouraging active participation, and developing good digital habits are essential for healthy aging.

Homoeopathy treats the physical and emotional problems that the elderly experience as a result of screen use in a

holistic and individualized way. When used responsibly and in conjunction with lifestyle changes, it may promote better quality of life and mental health in the digital age. More evidence and awareness in the society is required to spread these benefits. Therefore, more clinical studies are required to further ratify the effectiveness of this therapeutic tool that may be effective in the management of such cases.

Conflict of Interest

Not available

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