

# Heart to Heart Talk

With Philip S. Chua, M.D.

## Computer Health Hazards

### Is using a computer safe?

Yes, computing, just like other human activities, is safe unless abused. Computers are indispensable. In this age of technology revolution, everybody, if possible, should learn how to use computers in order to keep up with these exciting times of the shrinking world, to be competitive. Anyone with a computer and internet access can obtain practically any information desired, from movie trivia, to travel guides, health matters, shopping, banking, investing online, to history and socio-cultural information, etc., to name a few. The computers have really leveled the playing field for all of us in this fantastic informational age.

### Does computing lead to blindness?

No, that is a myth. The same was also once “suspected” and linked to the use of microwave ovens, and even to having frequent sex. These are all not true. There are no medical evidences to substantiate any of these. So, get on with it. Computing, I mean.

### What injuries are associated with computing?

A condition called Carpal Tunnel Syndrome (CTS) has been linked to extensive computer (or typing) job. Any prolonged, repetitive flexion and extension of the wrists (typing on keyboards) could result in compression of the median nerve as it passes through the carpal tunnel in the wrist, hence the name. This is especially true when the typist rests his/her wrist against the edge of the computer or typewriter. It is best to type with the rest “floating in the air” rather than resting (pressing) on a hard surface. Even cushioned wrist “pads” do not help much. Simply allowing your wrists to “float” while you type on the keyboard while minimizing extreme flexion and extension of the wrist will help prevent CTS. Give your wrists (and your whole body) rest and relaxation regularly at frequent intervals to minimize computer-related stresses.

### What are the symptoms of CTS?

Numbness and tingling of the palmar side of the thumb, index and middle

finger and the radial (outer) half of the ring finger are classic. It could even involve the entire hand in more severe cases. Some people wake up at night with burning or aching pain with numbness and tingling of the hand, and shake the hand to obtain relief and return to normal sensation.

### **Does computing lead to weight loss?**

Only to the extent of the individual's abstinence from eating because of "addiction" to computer works, games, surfing or chatting, etc. Weight loss and malnutrition have been reported among some teenage computer "nerds" who "overdosed" on computing and hardly touched food and drinks for days on end.

### **Is computing addictive?**

Addictive is not the right word. It is more habituating or habit-forming, where an individual, who is extremely interested in computer games or internet surfing, emailing, chatting, etc., has developed a strong and regular compulsion and a habit of "bonding" with the computer. This is especially the case among those who are "loners" or "alone." And the condition could be so severe as to be abnormal and unhealthy. There was a student who was reported missing from his classes for days, only to be found "holdup" in one room in an uninterrupted marathon of computing.

### **Should children be banned from computing?**

Most definitely not. Computers are a good thing. This is the best electronic "gadget" invented that is closest to the human brain, and the children of the world must have this as their ally in education, learning and recreation, in order to be competitive and successful in life. It is when and how computers are used or abused that should concern us all. Like anything else in life, like food, alcohol, rest, shopping, sex, and now computers, children should be taught and disciplined on how to deal with these in an appropriate and prudent manner. This is especially true in developing self-imposed determination as to what NOT to access on the web, even when no one is watching. Any activity without discipline, or anything extreme, or in excess, even of water, can be unhealthy.

### **Are computer games good for children?**

It depends as to what the nature and goal of the games are. If they are about "violence and killing people," even if they are the designated "enemies," the threshold for restraint to kill among these children (chronic) viewers is lowered. Studies have shown that some children (and even adults) exposed to much violence on the television, movies or computer games, have higher tendencies to violence and

senseless killing themselves. The games involving role models like James Bond, Batman and Robin, and Superman, Spiderman, etc. are healthier for children.

## **Does computing lead to truancy and absenteeism in school?**

There is no doubt that this is happening because of unguided, unsupervised use of computers among undisciplined young children and teenagers. Hardcore sex on the internet is also a major problem we now face. That is why laws should be passed in the country (or in each city and town) to restrict the proximity to schools and churches of internet cafes, and legislations on how to deal with pornography on the internet. But the best guide and “law enforcers” are the parents or guardians, who must be precise and firm in their “house or family rules” for the children. Compassion, understanding and discipline are the keys to good parenting in general. And they apply to the proper use of computers are home, in school or at internet cafes as well.

## **Does computing lead to bad posture?**

Spine alignment or posture could be caused by how one habitually sits, especially for a prolonged period of time. Whether it is computing, typing or simply writing, a good posture is important. Children must be reminded of this constantly.

## **Does chronic exposure to computers lead to cancer?**

No evidence supports this. The radiation is minimal and safe, as far as present legal guidelines are concerned. Nonetheless, breaks and rests should punctuate computer use, simply to relax, if for nothing at all, because computer related stress is real. Too loud audio in computer games, and looking at a bright computer monitor screen for prolonged period day in and day out, can lead to hearing and visual impairment, respectively.

## **Are computer buffs less sociable?**

No, the normal use of computers, even among those regular and chronic user, does not make a person less social. As a matter of fact, computer use tend to transform people to be more sociable and more cultured. They also become more financially oriented, bargain hunters, better at investments and more suave in overall business compared to the older (pre-computer) generations or their young contemporaries who are computer-illiterate.

## **Does computing “teach” impatience?**

Since everything in computing is as instant and as fast as a click of the mouse, one who is used to this kind of speedy efficiency and lightning response may develop abnormal intolerance to the “normal” human pace. This is especially true when the child starts using the computer at say, age 7 or even younger. They begin to expect “instant” responses (from humans) to “everything the demand,” like the computer responds to their every finger click.

## **How about the effect on the psyche?**

This computer age has tremendous advantages not only for businesses but for everybody, especially for the children. They learn more and faster. They become more self-reliant, resourceful, independent, confident and more positive in their outlook of their future. They feel empowered by having available to them limitless information, facilities for domestic and international communication (voicemail, email, chat, surf) and games and recreation, etc. This empowerment has created thousands of young multimillionaires and billionaires, led by Bill Gates. Our youngsters of today feel more confident than ever before that they too someday could reach their star.

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