

Elementary School Age Children and Their Eyes

This BC HealthFile will help you to identify common vision problems in elementary school age children. Children's vision continues to develop until about 8 years of age. After that, eyesight development is complete and cannot be corrected easily.

Should my child have a vision test?

Many children do not know that they have a vision problem. Changes in a child's vision happen very slowly. A child may think that everyone else sees the same way, especially if a child develops nearsightedness (myopia) and faraway objects appear blurry.

Some problems can end in permanent vision damage if not corrected early. These include:

- **Crossed eyes** (strabismus) or the eye muscles point one or both eyes in the wrong direction.
- **Lazy eye** (amblyopia) or the vision in one eye is weaker than the other. The child's brain ignores the weak eye and uses the strong eye to see. If untreated, the child's brain develops a clear picture in the good eye and a blurry picture in the weak eye. This can result in permanent problems that cannot be treated.

Vision problems often have a family history. If you know of vision or eye problems in your family, your child's eyes should be examined by an eye doctor.

Vision Problems and Symptoms in Children

Your child should see a family doctor or eye doctor (optometrist or ophthalmologist) if you notice any of these signs or symptoms.

- Blurred vision
- Headaches
- Red, itchy or watery eyes
- Squinting, rubbing the eyes, or excessive blinking
- Covering or closing one eye
- Holding objects too close
- Reading items or watching television very closely
- Avoiding activities needing distance vision
- Poor performance in school
- Lack of coordination or clumsiness in physical activities

Eye Safety for Children

You can prevent eye injuries and increase eye safety for children.

- Teach children to play safely with toys and games.
- Take rest breaks to avoid eye strain while performing close up activities, such as using a computer, playing video games, or watching television. These activities can decrease the natural blink reflex and cause irritated, red, dry eyes.

- Provide an area for homework with even lighting and free from glare or reflections. Children should take regular breaks to rest their eyes when reading.
- Teach children not to walk or run while carrying sharp objects. Objects, such as pencils, keys, umbrellas, scissors, lollipop sticks, uncooked spaghetti, drinking straws, or pieces of wire, can cause an eye injury.
- Teach children to sit at least 3 meters (8 to 10 feet) away from the television screen. Make television viewing easier with overall soft lighting.

Sunglasses and Protection

Ultraviolet (UV) rays from the sun can cause eye damage, as well as harm your skin. Sunglasses are recommended for children and adults. To protect eyes, sunglasses should:

- Have large lenses and a wraparound design, fully covering the eyes;
- Fit well or snugly;
- Be comfortable for the child;
- Have labels with 99-100 per cent UVA and UVB protection; and
- Come off easily if any cords or strings are attached and pulled roughly.

If your child wears corrective lenses or glasses, check these for UV protection.

Hats may provide better sun protection. Hats that shade the face and eyes can be easier for children to keep on than sunglasses. Hats should be worn by children when playing in the sun to prevent sunburn and any harm to their vision.

Could my child be colour blind?

Some children, mostly boys, have trouble seeing certain colours. They *can* see colours,

but they have some trouble identifying some colours. Some colours can look the same and be harder to tell apart, such as the difference between grey and purple.

Your child can have a simple colour vision test by an eye doctor to check for concerns. Knowing this can help you understand and deal with difficulties your child may be having in learning situations that involve colours.

For More Information

For more information about vision screening in your health authority please contact your local public health unit.

To find an optometrist in your area, contact the BC Association of Optometrists at 604-737-9907, or toll-free 1-888-393-2226, or visit www.optometrists.bc.ca.

For more information on ultraviolet radiation and eyesight, see BC HealthFile [#11 Ultraviolet Light](#). See also BC HealthFile [#53a Young Children and Their Eyes](#).

For more BC HealthFile topics visit www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/index.stm, or visit your local public health unit.

Call the BC NurseLine to speak to a registered nurse, available 24-hours every day:

- In Greater Vancouver, call 604-215-4700
- In BC, call toll-free 1-866-215-4700
- Deaf and hearing-impaired, call 1-866-889-4700
- Pharmacist available 5pm to 9am every day
- Translation services in over 130 languages upon request.

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