

Your Child's Eyesight

Your child's eyesight is precious. Without good vision children can suffer enormous setbacks to learning and the development of all their life skills. Many parents do not realise that eyesight can be tested from a very early age and that it is recommended that children should have an eye examination at least by the age of three, or earlier if you think there may be a problem. Special tests have been devised for very young children and the earlier a problem is detected, the more effectively it can be treated. The great thing to remember is that eye examinations don't hurt!

Early eyesight

Until relatively recently it was assumed that a baby could not see at birth, and would not be able to focus properly until a few months old. Although the eyes are not fully developed at birth, and vision needs to be stimulated in order to develop correctly, it is now known that the majority of babies are born long-sighted, and the ability to focus on fine detail is acquired during the early months. At birth the eye is approximately three-quarters the size of an adult's and in the first six months of life the six muscles around the eye develop. It is quite usual for a baby's eyes to seem unco-ordinated in the first few weeks, as visual co-ordination begins to develop.

It's never too early to take your baby for an eye examination. Any defect - such as a squint - will cause problems later on unless treated at an early age. A child's vision is fully developed by the age of 8. Vision screening checks are often carried out by doctors, health visitors and other medically trained personnel, but these are not as comprehensive as a full eye examination by a qualified optometrist.

It's a common misconception that children's eyes cannot accurately be checked until they can read, but in fact, several special tests can be carried out at a very early age. As the child develops and communication skills improve, more detailed tests are also possible. 3-D vision, for example, can be tested with pictures of familiar objects.

Ensure good vision

Just as children visit the dentist at regular intervals from infancy, so it's worth making regular visits to the family optometrist. Many eyesight defects, such as long or short-sightedness, astigmatism or squint can be inherited, so if there is a history of any of these in your family your child's eyesight should be tested on a regular basis. Sometimes parents believe they see a squint in their child when, in fact, this is simply due to a fold of the skin as the nose is not fully developed.

The Eyecare Trust is a registered charity that exists to promote awareness of all aspects of eye health. For more information call our public information line on 0845 129 5001 or log on to www.eyecaretrust.org.uk



Factsheet

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Conversely, eyes sometimes appear to be straight when a squint really is present. Only a full eye examination can detect this type of defect. If left uncorrected for too long some sight defects cannot be put right, but establishing a routine of regular eye examinations can minimise the chances of a sight defect being carried into adulthood. At certain stages children's eyes may need to be examined at intervals of months rather than years, and your optometrist is the person to advise you on the frequency of visits. Despite greater public awareness of the importance of regular eye examinations, many parents do not take their children to an optometrist either pre-school or throughout school life.

What if your child needs glasses?

If the time comes when a child needs to wear glasses, this need not be seen as a disadvantage. The wide variety of spectacle frames now available for children are comfortable and practical as well as stylish. They are well designed and attractive, with features such as adjustable nose pads and saddle bridges for small, unformed noses, and spring hinges for durability and comfort. Plastic lenses are recommended for children, being lighter and safer than glass, and these can be treated with anti-scratch coatings for durability.

Can children wear contact lenses?

Young children would normally only be prescribed contact lenses for special conditions. Older children may wear contact lenses, but both they and their parents must be aware of the high level of care required to keep their lenses clean and safe, as well as the need for frequent check-ups to keep their eyes healthy.

What is available under the NHS?

Under the NHS an eye examination is available without charge for all children up to the age of 16, and under 19 if they are in full-time education. As an indication of the importance of children's sight care, only a qualified practitioner - an optometrist or dispensing optician registered with the General Optical Council, or a registered medical practitioner - is permitted by law to supply children's spectacles.

Following an eye examination, parents are entitled to a voucher towards the cost of any glasses or contact lenses prescribed. The value of the voucher will be determined by the prescription needed. Most optical practices are able to offer a range of good quality, low cost frames for children. For further information on more common childhood sight defects such as squint, please

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refer to the eye disorder section of the information area. Alternatively, these are available from many opticians.

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