

## Let's take a closer look

Being able to see well is something that most of us in Australia take for granted and we quickly know when we need a visit to the optometrist. But it's trickier with kids because they don't know what they're supposed to see - 1 in 5 children can't see properly and don't even know it! Being able to watch and see teaches our children many of the simple but essential skills in life such as how to respond to people, catch a ball and hold their fork. It's estimated that as much as 80 per cent of a child's learning occurs through their eyes, and if their eyesight isn't the best, they are immediately at a huge disadvantage (in the classroom and at play). Fortunately, 90 per cent of blindness can be avoided if it's diagnosed and treated early. We recommend that children have their eyes and sight checked by the optometrist at age 3-4 years old and every 2-3 years until they leave High School. If the parents have any particular concerns about their child's eyes or sight at any age they should have them examined by an optometrist.

### What parents or teachers may see if a child has a problem with their eyes:

- > Unable to see the TV from the 'normal' watching distance
- > Losing their place when reading
- > Unusual behaviour when reading or looking at a small object (e.g. holding items very close, tilting their head to one side, closing one eye or squinting)
- > Rubbing their eyes, which are red, sore or watery
- > Headaches
- > Eye turned in (or out) or uncoordinated eye movements
- > Short attention span and disruptive behaviour

### Common eye problems in younger children and how to treat them



#### Strabismus (crossed eyes)

One of the most common eye conditions in children, resulting from problems with the muscles or nerves linked to focussing. It can be constant or intermittent and may affect just one eye or both. Early diagnosis is essential and the most appropriate treatment (special glasses, eye patches, eye exercises or surgery) will depend on the type and severity of the strabismus.

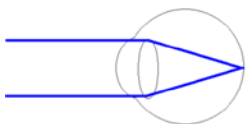
#### Amblyopia (lazy eye)

Generally a result of strabismus or refractive error (see below) that wasn't diagnosed and treated early enough. How well treatment works is limited after the age of 9 years old, so early diagnosis and treatment is very important.

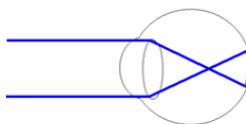
### Refractive error

is when light isn't focussed on the back of the eye properly. This can be from a misshapen cornea (windows at the front of the eye) or an eye that is a bit too long, or a bit too short. An eye that is too long will result in "myopia" (also known as "short-sightedness"), causing things in the distance to be blurry. An eye that is too short will result in "hyperopia" (also known as "long-sightedness"). Hyperopia can cause blur in the distance and up close. Occasionally, it is the eyeball that causes the distortion, by being football-shaped instead of the usual basketball-shaped. This results in "astigmatism" which causes blur in the distance and up close. Almost all refractive error is easily fixed with the correct prescription glasses or contact lenses.

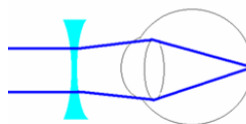
Normal focus



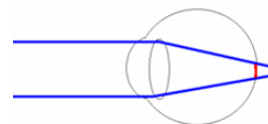
Short-sighted focus



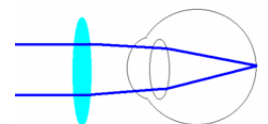
Short-sighted correction



Long-sighted focus



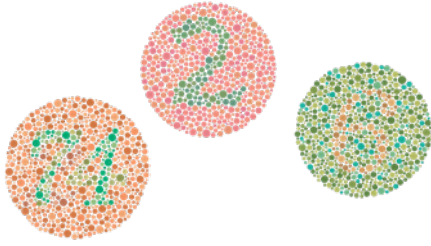
Long-sighted correction



### Binocular vision problems

Our eyes need to talk to each other and work together to see properly. Both eyes need to be focussed at the same distance and pointing in the same direction to achieve this. Binocular vision troubles can occur when there is an issue with the eyes pointing in the same direction, or if the eyes are focussing differently. Sometimes there are issues with both the alignment and the focussing of the eyes. This results in a range of symptoms including blur, double vision, sore eyes or tired eyes.

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### Colour vision defects

Anyone can be born with a colour vision defect, though it is more common in boys (approx. 8% of boys compared with less than 1% of girls). The most likely problem will be differentiating between red and green, but other colour defects can occur. It is important for the optometrist to pick the problem up early, explain the likely impacts on daily life and discuss any implications for learning, play, driving and career choices in the future.



### Trachoma

Trachoma is an aggressive bacterial infection which creates scarring under the eye lid. Whilst it has been eradicated in the majority of Australia, active trachoma infections are still evident in approximately 4% of ATSI children aged 5-9 years in some areas. The scarring resulting from multiple unnoticed infections over time cause the eye lashes to turn inwards and scratch the surface of the eye every time it opens and closes. The eye feels gritty and full of sand. If left untreated, the surface of the eye becomes so cloudy it is impossible to see through. Clean faces are an important preventative strategy, but regular eye health checks are essential to ensure infections are treated quickly.

### Teenagers – common issues

As children grow older and move to high school, it is still important to stay vigilant and have their eyes checked regularly by the optometrist. Common problems include dry eyes (as a result of increased screen time) which can make study uncomfortable. Teenagers can also develop refractive error and binocular vision problems, both of which must be diagnosed and treated before they apply for their Learners' permit.

### Creating a healthy eye environment

Whilst there's nothing we can do about our children's genetics, there is a lot we can set up to ensure that the eyes they are born with stay as healthy as possible.

- > Plenty of outdoor play
- > Regular breaks from reading to rest their eyes
- > Set up the computer screen at the optimum height and distance, encouraging regular breaks from screen time
- > Ensure children wear sunglasses & a wide-brimmed hat when outside
- > Pop plenty of fruit, veggies, nuts & fish into their lunch boxes and onto their dinner plates
- > Encourage good hygiene by providing regular opportunities to wash their hands and faces
- > Provide safety goggles for some sports and other potentially dangerous activities like helping Mum or Dad in the shed.

## Looking for more information?

Head to [www.goodvisionforlife.com.au](http://www.goodvisionforlife.com.au)