

Young children and their vision

Vision health contributes to your child's overall health and development. You can support your child's vision health and development through healthy eating, time outdoors and away from screens, and by taking your child to an eye care provider for routine comprehensive eye exams.

How developed is my child's vision?

Babies can see at birth, but they have to learn to use their eyes. They have to learn how to focus, track objects and use both eyes together. Babies learn eye-hand coordination and the distance of people or things.

By about one year of age, children are able to judge distances, and they have good eye-hand-body coordination for grasping, holding and throwing things.

During the preschool years, children further develop vision skills needed for eye-hand coordination and fine motor skills. They also learn how to recognize colours, shapes, letters and numbers.

Children's vision continues to develop as they grow, but issues become more difficult to correct at older ages. It is important for all children to have a full eye exam by kindergarten entry or earlier, to ensure any issues are addressed during this important time of visual development.

Should vision problems be corrected at an early age?

Yes, some vision concerns need to be corrected at an early age to prevent permanent vision damage.

- **Crossed eyes** (strabismus) is a condition where the eye muscles point one or both eyes in the wrong direction

- **Lazy eye** (amblyopia) is a condition where the vision in one eye is weaker than the other eye, even with glasses or other corrective aids. The child's brain ignores the weak eye and uses the strong eye to see. Treatment needs to commence within the early childhood years. If untreated, the child's brain develops a clear picture in the strong eye and a blurry picture in the weak eye and this condition can become permanent

Vision concerns often have a family history. If you know of vision concerns in your family, your child's eyes should be examined by an eye doctor (optometrist or ophthalmologist) by 3 years of age or earlier, especially if you notice any concerns. Some vision concerns or changes can be difficult to detect or notice without testing.

Optometrists recommend taking your child for their first routine eye exam, regardless of any concerns, between the age 6 to 12 months with all children receiving at least one full eye exam with an optometrist or ophthalmologist by kindergarten entry to ensure any vision issues are addressed during this important time of visual development.

What signs and symptoms should I watch for?

Your child should see your family health care provider or eye doctor if you notice any of these signs or symptoms:

- Red, itchy, watery eyes, or discharge
- Squinting or rubbing the eyes
- Excessive blinking
- Drooping upper eyelid
- Covering or closing one eye

- Tilting or holding the head in an unusual position
- Sensitivity to light
- Lack of concentration
- Holding objects too close
- Complaining of a sore head
- Avoiding activities needing distance vision
- Difficulty finding or picking up small objects
- Trouble focusing or making eye contact
- Eyes appear crossed or turned
- Difficulty following objects or people
- Avoiding books or screens
- Bumping into things

What can I expect at my child's vision test?

Your child can have an eye exam even if your child does not talk or read yet. The eye exam may check your child's:

- Eye health
- Eye muscle movement
- Ability to see clearly
- Ability to tell the distance of objects
- Ability to see colours

How can I help to promote eye health and prevent eye injuries for my child?

You can reduce the risk of eye injuries and increase eye safety for children by doing the following:

- Do not allow your child to play with sharp items such as darts, scissors or sharp toys. The use of age-appropriate scissors should be supervised
- Teach good hygiene habits like washing hands before touching eyes
- Do not allow your child to light fireworks or stand near people who light them

- Ensure your child wears a properly fitted helmet with facial protection during activities that pose a risk of facial injuries and lacerations (e.g., ice hockey). Keep your child or toddler away from older children who are playing with sharp objects
- Teach children not to walk or run while carrying sharp objects, such as pencils, sticks or scissors
- Keep your child away from power tools, lawn mowers or chemicals. Store these items securely and out of reach
- Limit your child's screen viewing to no more than one hour per day for ages 2 to 4. It is recommended that children under age 2 have no screen time, except for live video-chatting with parental support, due to its potential for social development
- Keep children at least 3 metres (8 to 10 feet) away from the TV screen. Place the television in a spot that reduces glare or use soft lighting
- Set a good example for your child by wearing eye protection yourself

What about wearing sunglasses and other types of protection?

Ultraviolet (UV) rays from the sun can cause eye damage, as well as harm the 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 and be comfortable
- Have labels with 99 to 100 per cent UVA and UVB protection
- Come off easily if any cords or strings are attached and pulled. There is a risk of strangulation if the cords or strings do not come off easily

If your child wears corrective lenses or glasses, make sure they have UV protection.

Hats that shade the face and eyes may provide better sun protection. Hats can be easier for children to keep on than sunglasses. Children should wear hats when playing in the sun to prevent sunburn and any harm to their eyes. To learn more, visit [HealthLinkBC File #11 Ultraviolet radiation](#).

Could my child be colour blind?

Some children, males more often than females, have trouble seeing certain colours. They can see colours, but the spectrum they can distinguish is less than people without colour deficiency. Some colours can look the same and be harder to tell apart, such as the difference

between certain shades of red and green.

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

For more information

To learn more about your child's vision health, contact your local public health unit.

To find an optometrist in your area, contact the BC Doctors of Optometry at 604-737-9907 or toll-free 1-888-393-2226, or visit <https://bc.doctorsofoptometry.ca>.