

Childhood myopia is on the rise – causes and prevention



Myopia in kids is a common refractive error and the leading cause of vision impairment among children. Also known as nearsightedness, it is a condition that affects distance vision: objects that are near appear clear and objects farther away are blurry.

But just because myopia is common, doesn't mean it is benign. If childhood myopia is not managed properly, it can lead to high myopia and other serious vision complications in adulthood. And not all kids will have obvious symptoms of myopia. This is one reason why regular pediatric eye exams are critical for all kids.

WHAT CAUSES MYOPIA IN CHILDREN?

Parents are often concerned about the causes of myopia and wonder if their kids are at risk. This can be a special concern for parents who are nearsighted themselves.

The exact cause of nearsightedness is not fully understood, but there are a number of known risk factors. A child may be at risk of developing myopia due to one or more of these factors:

- Genetics
- Environmental factors
- Visual habits

Genetics – If one parent has myopia, the child's risk for myopia is three times greater. If both parents are nearsighted, the child's risk for myopia is double that.



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Environmental factors and visual habits are known as “modifiable” risk factors. Unlike genetics, these factors can be easily modified through simple behavior and habit changes.

And they are receiving a lot of attention these days. Research is showing more and more evidence that these “healthier” behaviors can delay the onset of myopia.

Environmental factors – There is strong evidence that not spending enough time outdoors is related to the onset of myopia. Parents should encourage their kids to spend around 2 hours a day outside in natural daylight.

Visual habits – There is also evidence that prolonged near work may lead to myopia. Near work is any task that requires close visual focus, like reading and using digital devices. Holding books or digital screens too close to the eyes for long periods may also increase the risk of myopia.

Parents should encourage their kids to take frequent vision breaks during near work.

HOW TO REDUCE A CHILD’S RISK OF MYOPIA

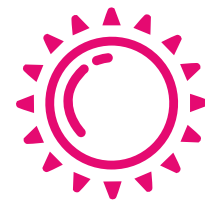
Time outdoors – One of the best things to tell children to reduce their risk of myopia is, “Go outside and play.”

A number of studies show that spending more time outdoors may help prevent or reduce the progression of myopia in children. In fact, there is evidence that outdoor time may have a higher impact than both genetics and time spent doing near work.

Research has found that outdoor exposure to natural sunlight may influence the actual development of the eyes. The most common cause of blurry distance vision is related to the axial length of the eye. This is the length of the eye from front to back, and myopia occurs if it grows too long.

Studies show that outdoor exposure to sunlight (or a lack of exposure) is related to this growth. Children who spend more time outdoors have a lower average growth in the axial length of their eyes.

Outdoor time has also been shown to have a protective effect on myopia risk in children who are not already nearsighted. And it’s been shown to reduce the progression of myopia in children who are.



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Regular vision care exams – Ensuring that children receive regular eye exams is also extremely important. Myopia usually begins in childhood, and the peak years of myopia progression are in childhood.

Myopia control strategies are effective, but only if they are used early enough. That's why it's critical that myopia is detected and diagnosed early on. But remember, many kids won't display obvious signs of myopia or complain of symptoms.

Vision experts recommend that all children follow this eye exam schedule:

- First eye exam at 6 months
- Next exam between ages 3 and 5
- Third exam when starting first grade
- Annual exams throughout school

If your child has progressive myopia, they will likely need to have eye exams more frequently.

It's also critical to keep up with regular eye exams to ensure your child's vision prescription is up to date. If their lens prescription is too weak for their degree of myopia, it can increase the risk of myopia progression.

Reach out to your EyeMed representative and discuss how vision benefits can help manage childhood myopia – or visit eyemed.com to learn more

¹ McManes, A; "Myopia and children: Is your child at risk?"; All About Vision; allaboutvision.com; medically reviewed March 2022.