

Childhood Eye Diseases

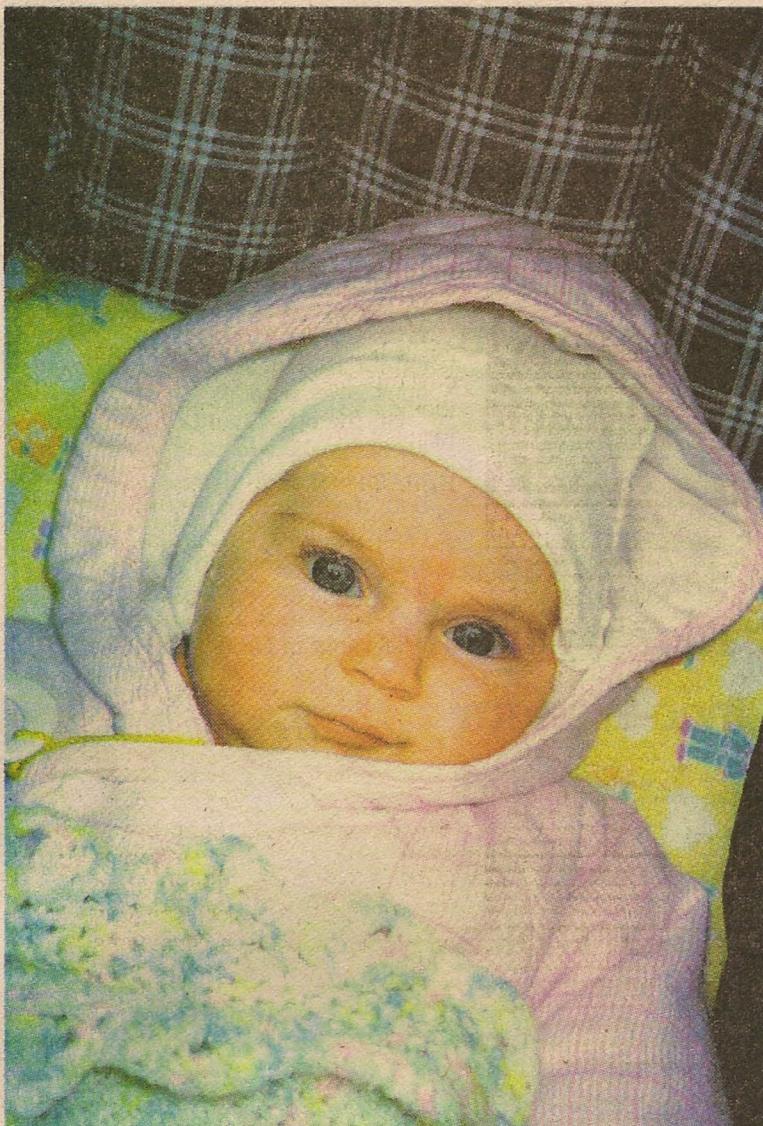
By DR ARUN SAMPRATHI

EIGHTEEN-year-old Aneesh was playing with his friends when something fell into his right eye and he could not open his eyes. It was a rude shock for him to notice that he couldn't see anything with his left eye. On further examination with a eye specialist, he was found to have a lazy eye due to high myopia (-14.0 D short sight) in his left eye. He was informed that no treatment was possible at his age. If only Aneesh had undergone a routine eye examination in early childhood (before 9 yrs), his defect could have been rectified.

Early diagnosis is critical because a child's visual development reaches maturity between the ages of 9-11. Catching problems within the narrow window of birth to pre-adolescence can mean the difference between normal vision and a permanently 'lazy' eye. If your child is unable to communicate a problem that is not detected during the visual development stage, it is likely that his vision will never be correctable to 'normal' levels. That's because a child's brain has the amazing ability to adapt, and very quickly learns to block off or suppress an 'abnormal' image.

For example, if a child sees double, his brain adjusts by suppressing the vision of the turned eye in order to maintain a single image. This problem is called amblyopia or lazy eye (uncorrectable vision loss in a seemingly normal eye) and can occur for a variety of reasons. Fortunately, early diagnosis and treatment can usually reverse the problem and yield excellent outcomes.

This is the primary reason that regular eye exams are so critical in children. In some cases it is appropriate as early as six months. Infant exams are especially important if immediate family members have conditions such as a crossed or "lazy" eye, glaucoma, blindness or require a very strong glasses prescription. Children from families with known eye problems are more at risk — they should have their first eye exam at the



age of three. Even if nobody in the family has a history of eye problems, parents should still be on the lookout. Some common signs to watch for:

- ◆ Frequent headaches
- ◆ Redness or watery eyes while reading
- ◆ Spelling mistakes
- ◆ Frustrated with school
- ◆ Wandering or crossed eyes
- ◆ Disinterest in reading or viewing distant objects
- ◆ Squinting or turning the head in an unusual manner while watching television
- ◆ Watching television from a very close distance
- ◆ Poor handwriting; Slow writing speed
- ◆ Low self-esteem

Common eye disorders in childhood include:

Myopia (Nearsightedness)

In myopia, the eyeball is too long

for the normal focusing power of the eye. As a result, images of distant objects appear blurred.

Hyperopia (Farsightedness)

In this condition, the eyeball is too short for the normal focusing power of the eye. In children, the lens in the eye accommodates for this error and provides clear vision for distance and usually near viewing, but with considerable effort that often causes fatigue and sometimes crossed eyes (Squint).

Astigmatism

Astigmatism results primarily from an irregular shape of the front surface of the cornea, the transparent 'window' at the front of the eye. Persons with astigmatism typically see vertical lines more clearly than horizontal ones, and sometimes the reverse.

Squint (crossed eyes)

Squint is a misalignment of the

eyes, which causes them to point in different directions. Squint is a common condition among children. It is not a sign of luck as the grandmother says. Squint can be a sign of blindness or poor vision in that eye & also loss of depth perception or 3D vision. Glasses or an eye patch are also used to treat squint, but surgery may be required in some cases.

Retinopathy of Prematurity

Soon after birth, some premature infants develop changes in the blood vessels of the eye's retina that can permanently impair vision. Hence it is extremely important that all premature infants should have an eye examination. Also premature babies are more likely to develop short sight, squint etc. later in childhood.

Allergic conjunctivitis

Eye allergies are common in children. They cause redness, itching, & watering of the eyes. Avoidance of exposure to dust is the most important & difficult part of treatment. Steroid eye drops are sometimes prescribed in severe cases & should strictly be used under the guidance of your doctor.

Cataract

Cataracts, though common in adults, can occur in children. Most often they are caused by infections during pregnancy, heredity etc. cataracts in children require early surgery by a Pediatric eye Surgeon to prevent development of lazy eye.

When to have an eye exam?

- ◆ At birth
- ◆ 6 months of age
- ◆ Three-four years
- ◆ Then at two yearly intervals

So, if your child has not had an eye examination by an eye doctor, do it immediately & save your child from having a permanent defect. Remember screening at schools or at an optical shop cannot substitute a thorough eye examination by a specialist.

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