



A beginner's guide to myopia in children

Myopia is another word for nearsightedness. That's when close-up objects look clear, but ones farther away — like the front of a classroom — look blurry. Myopia is the result of the eye growing faster and longer than it should, becoming weaker along the way.

As kids get older, nearsightedness becomes more common. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, it affects about 5% of preschoolers, 9% of school-age children and 30% of teens¹ — and these numbers are on the rise.

Here's what you need to know about myopia and how to help your child see better.

United
Healthcare

Why childhood myopia is increasing

Myopia is increasing in the United States. The number of nearsighted adults and kids rose from 25% in the early 1970s to nearly 42% just 3 decades later.²

“The main reason why we’ve seen it increase in kids is because they’re not spending enough time outdoors in the sunlight,” says Laura Vasilakos, O.D., a developmental optometrist in Hanover, Massachusetts.

Instead, they’re spending too much time indoors doing near work on their computers, tablets and cellphones. “The smaller the device, the more problematic it is,” she says. “I’m more concerned about kids spending hours on their cellphones versus just on their computer.”

Genetics can also play a role. When parents have myopia, they may pass it to their children. The chances that a child may develop myopia are 1 in 2 when both parents have myopia, and 1 in 3 when one parent has myopia.³

Will my child outgrow myopia?

In fact, the younger the child, the faster it may progress — until the eye stops growing, which can be at 16 to 18 years, and even as late as their early 20s.

If left untreated, myopia can increase the risk of vision-threatening conditions later in life, such as glaucoma and cataracts.⁴

Myopia can also affect your child’s schoolwork. They won’t be able to see things like the smart board at the front of their classroom. Another problem? It can cause some of the same symptoms as ADHD, such as trouble sitting still and seeming distracted, which may lead to a misdiagnosis.

That’s why parents need to know the signs of myopia in their kids, says Vasilakos.



Signs your child may be nearsighted⁵

- Needs to sit at the front of the classroom
- Sits very close to the TV screen
- Squints, rubs their eyes or blinks a lot
- Often complains of headaches
- Holds books very close to their face
- Seem to have a short attention span
- Complains of double vision

Next steps to take:

Set up a comprehensive eye exam with an optometrist right away. Ideally, kids should get exams at these ages:⁶

- 6 months to 2 years
- 3 years
- 5 to 6 years (before starting school)
- Annually throughout their school years

Most kids tend to become nearsighted (or notice it) around third grade, Vasilakos adds.

How do eye doctors treat myopia?

While eye doctors can't cure or reverse myopia, they can prescribe eyeglasses or contact lenses so that your child can see clearly again.

There's a possible complication when kids develop severe myopia, says Laura Vasilakos, O.D., a developmental optometrist in Hanover, Massachusetts. "They have a higher risk of developing eye diseases later in life," she says. That can include glaucoma and cataracts, among others.⁷

Myopia-management treatment

Here are a few options known to slow down the progression of myopia as a child grows.

Atropine eye drops These are the same eye drops that eye doctors use to check vision during an exam. In low doses they may help slow myopia, says Vasilakos. You put 1 drop in each of your child's eyes at bedtime. In a study, kids between the ages of 4 and 9 who were given these drops every night for 2 years were much less likely to go on to develop myopia.⁸

Myopia control soft contact lenses (MiSight 1 day)

These are known as peripheral defocus contact lenses. The center of the lens corrects distance vision so that your child can see. The outer portion redirects light to get the eye growth back on track.

When can kids start wearing them? "I'll consider them in kids as young as 7 or 8, if I think they are mature enough to handle contact lenses," Vasilakos says.

Myopia control spectacles These are specifically designed to slow myopia progression by correcting nearsightedness in the center of the lens and applying peripheral defocus on the outer edges. They are used in Europe and Canada and are awaiting U.S. Food and Drug Administration approval.⁹

Orthokeratology (ortho-K) While kids sleep, these firm contact lenses reshape and flatten the central cornea. "They wake up with clear vision," says Juanita Collier, O.D., an optometrist and owner of 4D Vision Gym in Cromwell, Connecticut. But these special contacts only boost your child's eyesight temporarily. Once your child stops wearing the lens, their cornea gradually goes back to its original shape. But over time these lenses have been shown to slow the progression of myopia.



Things to do at home to slow down nearsightedness

While eye doctors can help your child see more clearly, there are things you can do for your child at home that may help prevent or at least slow the increase of myopia.

- **Limit their screen time.** Kids who spend most of their time on both an iPhone and a computer have an 80% higher risk of developing myopia, according to the American Optometric Association.⁷
- **Send them outside.** Being outdoors also helps boost vitamin D levels. Low levels of the sunshine vitamin have been associated with an increased risk of nearsightedness, Collier says.

Get more info

Visit myuhcvision.com for additional health and wellness content

United Healthcare

¹American Academy of Pediatrics. Myopia (Nearsightedness) in Children & Teens. <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/eyes/Pages/Myopia-Nearsightedness.aspx>. May 2022.

²JAMA Ophthalmology. Reducing the Progression of Myopia. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/2769247>. August 2020.

³Optician. C52102: Is myopia control the next contact lens revolution? <https://www.opticianonline.net/cpd-archive/127>. Accessed Sept. 29, 2023.

⁴American Academy of Ophthalmology. Nearsightedness: What is Myopia? <https://www.aao.org/eye-health/diseases/myopia-nearsightedness>. September 2022.

⁵American Academy of Ophthalmology. Myopia. <https://eyewiki.aao.org/Myopia>. August 2023.

⁶American Optometric Association. School-Aged Vision: 6 to 18 Years of Age. <https://www.aoa.org/healthy-eyes/eye-health-for-life/school-aged-vision?sso=y>. Accessed Sept. 29, 2023.

⁷American Optometric Association. Myopia (nearsightedness). <https://www.aoa.org/healthy-eyes/eye-and-vision-conditions/myopia?sso=y>. Accessed Sept. 29, 2023.

⁸American Optometric Association. Study: Could atropine delay or prevent myopia in children? <https://www.aoa.org/news/clinical-eye-care/public-health/myopia-drops>. March 2023.

⁹JAMA Ophthalmology. Spectacle Lenses With Aspherical Lenslets for Myopia Control vs Single-Vision Spectacle Lenses: A Randomized Clinical Trial. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35357402/>. May 2022.

UnitedHealthcare vision coverage provided by or through UnitedHealthcare Insurance Company, located in Hartford, Connecticut, UnitedHealthcare Insurance Company of New York, located in Islandia, New York, or their affiliates. Administrative services provided by Spectera, Inc., United HealthCare Services, Inc. or their affiliates. Plans sold in Texas use policy form number VPOL.06.TX, VPOL.13.TX or VPOL.18.TX and associated COC form number VCOC.INT.06.TX, VCOC.CER.13.TX or VCOC.18.TX. Plans sold in Virginia use policy form number VPOL.06.VA, VPOL.13.VA or VPOL.18.VA and associated COC form number VCOC.INT.06.VA, VCOC.CER.13.VA or VCOC.18.VA. This policy has exclusions, limitations and terms under which the policy may be continued in force or discontinued. For costs and complete details of the coverage, contact either your broker or the company.