

Strabismus

Strabismus is a condition where one eye is looking straight ahead, and the other eye is looking in a different direction. It may be looking in, out, up or down – or a combination of these. The turn may be constant (there all the time), or intermittent (only there sometimes - for example when the child is tired or if they are concentrating on something like a book or toy). It may be the same eye that turns all the time, or it may swap from one eye to the other.

Strabismus affects up to 5% of Australians. Some people call a strabismus a “lazy eye”, however this can be confusing as the term “lazy eye” can also be used to describe a droopy eyelid (ptosis) or poor vision in one eye (amblyopia).

What causes a strabismus?

For many children the cause can be one or more of the following. However, there are still a number of children where the exact cause(s) are unknown.

- Some forms of strabismus can be inherited (passed on through the family). There are a number of studies looking into this, but the results of these studies are not yet known.
- Sometimes while a baby is developing in the womb some of the connections from the brain to the eye do not develop normally. These children often develop an eye turn in the first 6 months of their life. This is known as an infantile strabismus (or by its older name – a congenital strabismus).
- More commonly a strabismus develops later (around 2-4 years of age) and at this age the eye often turns in. This type of strabismus is more commonly associated with being longsighted and glasses can help with this type of strabismus.
- Sometimes a strabismus can occur after a head injury, or loss of vision to one eye due to trauma.
- Rarely, a strabismus can be a sign of a more serious eye condition or health problem.

How will my child's eyes be assessed?

To work out what is happening with your child's eyes they will have a detailed examination by an orthoptist, and then by an eye doctor. An orthoptist is a university-trained eye practitioner who specialises in eye movement problems. They will assess your child's vision and perform a number of tests to see how the eyes “work together”.

Your child will also have some eye drops to make their pupil (the black part of the eye) go large (dilate). This allows the doctor to do two things-

- 1) Have a look inside the eye using special equipment to make sure that the eye itself is healthy.



- 2) Accurately check to see if your child would benefit from wearing glasses (is longsighted, short sighted or has astigmatism). This test can be done without drops, however it is often not very accurate with children as they may not be able to concentrate for long enough or may not be able to accurately describe what they are seeing. It is much more accurate to do this check after drops have been given.

Treatment

Treatment will depend on what is causing the strabismus. This may be different with every patient. Treatment is tailored to your child's unique circumstances. Please try not to compare what is happening with your child to others. Even though two children may look like they have a similar strabismus, their circumstances are often quite different.

Glasses

If your child is found to be longsighted, short-sighted or have astigmatism, they may be prescribed glasses. Prescribing glasses can help to straighten the eyes completely for some children or only partially in others. Sometimes glasses are necessary to help your child see properly but unfortunately do not help straighten their eyes.

Surgery

Surgery involves moving one or more of the eye muscles that are attached to the outside of the eye. The eye is not removed! The operation is done under general anaesthetic. It is usually performed as a "day case", which means that there is no need to stay in hospital overnight. Not every patient with strabismus will require surgery. There are lots of factors to consider and these are best discussed with your doctor.

Will eye exercises cure my child's strabismus?

In the majority of cases, the answer is no. Muscle weakness is rarely the cause of a strabismus. Therefore, doing exercises to make the muscles stronger will not help. For example, if your child has a strabismus because they are very longsighted, their eye is shorter than normal. Doing eye exercises will not make their eye grow longer.

Will using an eye patch cure my child's strabismus?

In the majority of cases, the answer is no. If your child has a strabismus their brain often ignores the information from one eye. This can mean that the vision does not develop properly, or the vision gets worse. A patch is worn over the "good" eye to make the vision in the "bad" eye better. In this setting it is being used to treat the vision, not the turn, and it will not straighten the eye. However, patching is an important part of your child's overall treatment plan. If you are unsure of your child's treatment, please ask your doctor.

In a small number of other conditions patching may be prescribed for different reasons. If this is the case with your child, your doctor will explain to you why patching has been recommended.



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