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See myopia for what it is

Terri Soh wants to ask if you have ever wondered why your child is sitting closer and closer to the TV.

It might have been the exciting scene from that superhero movie that got his attention, or the Disney character that he hugs to sleep at night writ large on the silver screen.

But do take note of how often this occurs, so as not to miss the early warning signs of myopia. My little girl of 6 just started school early this year but is already on her 3rd pair of spectacles.

I approached Dr Christopher Khng, Consultant Ophthalmologist from the EyeWise Vision Clinic, Gleneagles Medical Centre, who has an active interest in both teaching and research, to provide us insights into the early warning signs of myopia.

Warning signs – at home

According to Dr Khng, apart from sticking to the TV, some children

may constantly be rubbing the eyes due to unclear vision.

Others may habitually start to hold books and reading materials very close to their faces. This is a poor practice as it requires more focusing effort by the child, and holding the book in such a manner will also cut out light and causes poor lighting on the text.

Some children with myopia may also be developing astigmatism. These children may start to tilt their heads while watching TV, as vision is clearer at certain angles. This headtilt helps to correct some of the astigmatism.

But most obviously, the clearest sign is when a child says that his or her vision is not clear. However they may not even be aware that their vision is unclear, so this is question you have to ask of them regularly.

Warning signs – in school

Regular eye screening is done to catch vision problems early in Singapore. Children are usually sent for visual screening at the polyclinics at age 4 and 6 years, and then this is done regularly

local study identified that children who perform a lot of work close to the eyes such as reading and playing handheld games are at higher risk of developing myopia. Specifically, children who read more than 3 books a week were more than twice as likely to be myopic.

The duration of continuous reading also seems to have an

habit can be altered to lower the risk of myopia.

Children should spend more time outdoors. Dr Khng showed us an Australian study which observed that even with children from the same ethnic group and background, the group that did not spend time outdoors were at higher risk of becoming myopic, even though the 2 groups did the same amount of nearwork.

This might be because children indoors may not get to relax their eyes fully by focussing on distant objects.

What can you do now?

If like mine, your child is already myopic and wearing glasses, you should bring have the spectacle prescription checked on a regular basis. This should preferably be every 6-9 months if the prescription is not stable, otherwise yearly checks will do.

If the power is increasing at an alarming rate such as 100-200 degrees every 6 months, then a check with a specialist eye doctor is advised.

Certain children may be suitable for atropine treatment to reduce the rate of myopia progression. Atropine eyedrops are prescribed to relax the muscles that are used for eye focusing.

This can halt or slow down myopia progression. However, there can be certain side effects, such as difficulty with near vision and glare.

Myopia is not just an inconvenience; high myopia can lead to serious eye problems like retinal detachment and glaucoma, which may ultimately lead to blindness. All of this is preventable if myopia is controlled ASAP. So maybe now, it is time to bring your child away from the TV and out for a walk? **LWB**



If your child is already myopic and wearing glasses, you should have the spectacle prescription checked on a regular basis.

while in school. All of these vision screenings are meant to pick up vision problems including myopia.

Why is it happening to us?

Although environmental factors play a role, Dr Khng elaborates that myopia results from an interaction between a child's genes and the environment. The risk is higher if one parent is myopic, compared to if no parent is myopic. This risk is higher still if both parents are myopic.

Certain lifestyle factors and habits also increase the risk of myopia. A

effect on myopia risk. Dr Khng recommends that your child should spend not more than 35-40 minutes reading continuously, and should take a 5 minute break after this period to relax.

Thus, eyes are more likely to become myopic if they remain in a state of continuous near focus without breaks.

Your child's risk factors

The genetic risk factors of myopia for your child cannot be changed. However, reading and closework