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I CAN SEE CLEARLY

It's not enough to take vision breaks by looking out the window. Experts are now getting kids to go outside to play.
By WONG SIOW YUEN

The best thing you can do to help your child's vision is also the simplest and cost-free — get outside!

Research shows that for every extra hour a child spends outdoors, the risk of myopia goes down by 10 per cent.

Another study compared six- to seven-year-old Chinese children in Sydney and Singapore. Only 3.3 per cent of Sydney kids were myopic compared to 29.1 per cent in Singapore.

Genetic factors were about equal at 68 per cent and 71 per cent had one or more myopic parent.

It would be easy to point the finger at our demanding academic schedule but surprise, surprise, the Sydney kids read more books and did more near work. The biggest influence seems to be the amount of hours the Sydney group spent outdoors. They are



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in the sunshine doing activities for almost 14 hours per week compared to our three hours.

Angeline Goh, for one, makes sure her highly myopic 11-year-old gets 90 minutes of soccer, badminton, swimming or cycling a day. It wasn't a reaction to the study that was only released late last year, but a lifestyle choice made two years ago (see sidebar).

GET UP AND GET OUT

Angeline's mindset change is something Dr Audrey Chia backs. The consultant ophthalmologist at the Singapore National →



Eye Centre and KK Women's and Children's Hospital often sees parents panic when told their child is myopic.

"They always ask if there is something they can do that can really help. Yes, and it is one of the simplest things," she says. Get your child to spend one to two hours a day outdoors.

It may not boil down to the sporting activity but rather the exposure to outdoor light. Myopia is caused by excessive eye growth. Intense outdoor light causes the retina to release a substance that inhibits eye growth and

It is possible to get a false reading when testing children as their eyes are very elastic.

may therefore slow down myopia.

When outdoors, the pupils constrict, which increases the visual depth of field or the distance at

which objects can be clearly seen.

With kids, it's often a case of monkey see, monkey do, so she encourages parents to lead by example. Part of the problem of myopia being caused by genes and the environment is that short-sighted parents are more likely to be sedentary, choosing to stay indoors to read or watch TV. Children living in this shared environment are naturally shaped to do the same.

Parents often seek Dr Chia's advice on alternative treatments that purport to help myopia, mainly eye-relaxing machines, pinhole glasses, progressive spectacles and even supplements.

"View scientific results with eyes wide open. The company that sells the product will naturally tell you about the successes and not the failures," she cautions. A good scientific study should follow at least 100 subjects over a two-year period. It should also be double blind, where neither subjects nor researchers know what treatment the patient is receiving until the end of the study.

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE

For one year, no doctor thought Jayden had vision problems. But Amy Cai knew something was amiss when her son – from the age of six months – would look at the TV sideways or with his eyes half-closed.

"I compared him to my older daughter at his age and just knew something was wrong," says the 34-year-old sales coordinator.

She brought up her concerns at his 12-month and 18-month health checks at the polyclinic but was told not to worry. But →



Did you know?

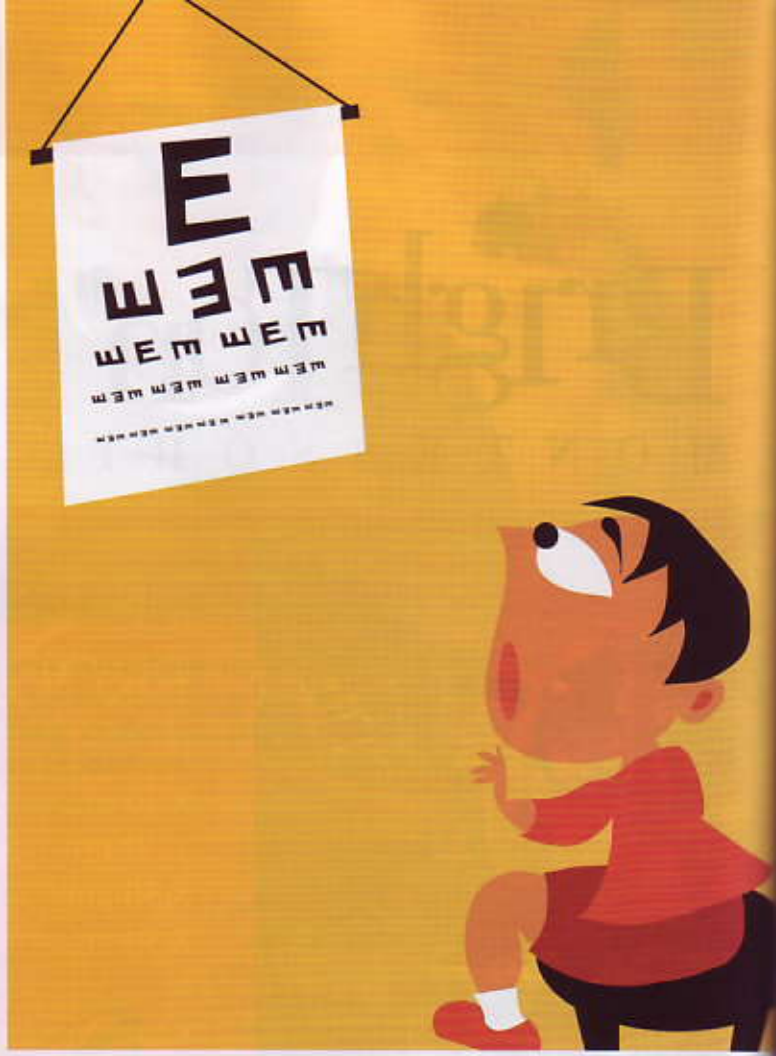
Getting rid of your myopia through Lasik or other surgery doesn't reduce your child's risk of myopia. "The genes for myopia will still be passed to them," says **Dr Christopher Khng**, consultant ophthalmologist and medical director at Eyewise Vision Clinic.

she did and when Jayden turned two, she insisted on getting a referral letter to see a paediatric eye specialist at the National University Hospital.

The results shocked her. Jayden was severely myopic with a refractive error of 1,000 degrees. It's rare to find myopia in children below four, says his ophthalmologist, Dr Inez Wong, a consultant at the hospital's Department of Ophthalmology. These cases of congenital myopia are classified as birth defects.

However, most short-sighted children in Singapore have school myopia, which is caused by genes and lifestyle. It's common knowledge that we have one of the highest rates of short-sightedness in the world, and across all age groups.

Fifteen per cent of four-year-olds and 28 per cent of seven-year-olds are myopic. Seven in 10 tertiary graduates wear glasses.



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GET THE RIGHT TEST

Children are screened at birth by a neonatalist, then at health check-ups till age four, as laid out in the Child Health Booklet. Your child's

doctor should be checking for visual acuity and squints but accuracy varies, as in Jayden's case. Mother's instinct or not, being observant and aware can help pick up what the doctors or nurses don't.

Dr Wong says if your child squints, tilts his head to watch TV, blinks excessively or if his left and right eyes don't look in the same direction, seek medical advice. See an ophthalmologist rather than an optometrist or optician, as this medically-trained doctor can dispense cycloplegic eye drops to relax the eye to get an accurate reading.

It is possible to get a false reading when testing children as their eyes are very elastic. This means they can easily compress and stretch the shape of their eyeballs to adjust focus near and far. Dr Chia refers to this as "eating up the glasses power" where the child is able to see clearly with both a -1.0 or -2.0 diopter lens.

"A clever optometrist will employ tricks like fogging or using colour comparison to test but

"I SPENT \$5,500 ON EYE TREATMENTS"

Nathanael Goh was diagnosed as myopic when he was six, and his condition has worsened steadily to 1,100 degrees now that he's 11.

Mum Angeline Goh and her husband are also highly myopic, but they aren't ready to accept that Nathanael's sight is likely to worsen further. Over the past five years, she has tried almost everything to delay this.

First there were atropine drops, which have been shown to stop progression of myopia in the first year of use and reduce by half in the second.

Administering these prescribed drops was a daily affair for a year and a half but there was no light at the end of the tunnel, as Nathanael belongs to the very small percentage who don't respond to them.

Then there were 20 acupuncture sessions and bilberry extracts which failed too. She estimates that she's spent \$5,500 on Nathanael's vision so far.

This includes half-yearly paediatric ophthalmologist visits and two pairs of photochromic progressive glasses each year, on top of the failed treatments.

She now focuses on everyday activities instead. They hardly watch TV, while computer use is limited and timed. Nathanael and his sister Natalie, eight, set the timer to the 15 minutes allowed and obediently shut the computer down when it beeps.

He is allowed to surf the Internet for school research but he keeps to the time limit and takes a vision break in between sessions.

Angeline also roped in help from his school, which makes sure that he sits in the front of the class and has a reduced reading load.

an ophthalmologist can use drops to stop the eyes from focusing and take a proper reading." For kids below seven, this is the most accurate way to check for myopia, says Dr Wong.

Every year from K1, your child's vision is checked by the School Health Services. Aside from myopia, strabismus or squints, amblyopia (lazy eye) and paediatric cataracts must be detected and corrected early.

Once myopia develops, expect it to increase by 100-150 degrees every year till it stabilises when the eyeball stops growing, which is around 14 years of age.

For all the care and precaution she took, Angeline was crestfallen that her younger daughter Natalie, eight, was recently diagnosed as moderately myopic.

"She had 6/6 vision at K2 and we thought she could be a pilot!" says the mother. Now at P2, the girl has to wear 400 degree glasses. "I guess there's no escape." ★

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