

# Eye to Eye

with Dr. Brenda McGregor



## Children's Eye Care: The Untold Story

There is a disturbing trend in pediatric eye care in America: only 14 percent of children under the age of six have had an eye and vision examination. This trend is unsettling, especially since it is more indicative of a less developed country than ours and could contribute to another alarming statistic: vision disorders are the fourth most common disability in the U.S. Also, these disorders are the most prevalent handicapping condition during childhood.

What is the cause of this widespread lack of pediatric eye care? Primarily it is a lack of knowledge. Many parents and caregivers simply do not know that early professional eye care is important. On the other hand, parents often rely on primary care physicians or school screenings for eye care.

### Regular Exams

According to the American Public Health Association, children should receive professional eye exams (at a minimum)—six months, two years and four years. Following the four-year-old exam, they should be checked every two years.

Unfortunately, delaying professional eye care for children may result in the late detection of several vision disorders, ranging from infections to vision impairment.

One of the primary reasons eye exams should be given to pre-school age children is educational readiness. Eye exams quickly and easily determine if there are any vision impairments that could prevent them from seeing the blackboard or their books well.

### The 'Red Eye' Isn't Always 'Pink Eye'

Although many people who wake up with a swollen red eye think it is the dreaded pink eye or conjunctivitis, it may actually be an infection called blepharitis—one of the most common causes of redness and swelling of the lids and

a common condition in children. Blepharitis occurs when the natural flora, common bacteria, that we all carry on our skin multiply too rapidly in the eyelashes for our immune systems to contain. Blepharitis is not always obvious to either the patient or his parents and it is not contagious, but if left untreated it could spread to an infection of the eyes.

Another common cause of red eyes develops from a stye. A stye is an infection of the gland along the eyelid, and allergic reactions can also cause symptoms often leading someone to self-diagnose conjunctivitis.

Also, allergies are frequently the reason for itchy, red eyes. Whether it's seasonal, or something the person came in contact with, an optometrist can help a patient find relief from these symptoms.

Although people may associate "critters and bugs" with poor hygiene, that's not really the case. Microscopic mites are everywhere and are only a problem when our immune systems are compromised. These mites often multiply in the lashes and cause redness and irritation. Another culprit—head lice—can cause red eyes. These lice are usually found in schools and day care centers and can cause inflammation and redness around the eye if they spread to that area.

A proper diagnosis of the red eye is important so patients can follow the appropriate treatment plan. An antibiotic is not always the right course of action. In some cases, warm compresses and topical steroid ointments may alleviate the symptoms and clear up the problem. That's why parents and children should see an optometrist before making any assumptions about the cause of red eyes.

Of course, preventive eye care is the best way to go. By examining children in their early years, vision problems and infections can be detected and treated to improve learning and overall health.

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