

What Are Vision Problems?

Vision problems happen when issues with the eyes, nerves connecting the eyes to the brain, or the brain itself make it harder to see clearly. Signs include squinting; blinking a lot; blurry vision; eye pain; sensitivity to light; seeing tiny shapes, spots, or flashes; and a sudden loss of vision.

Vision problems can be mild to severe. Low vision means a child has trouble seeing even with glasses, contacts, or surgery. It comes in many forms: nearsightedness, farsightedness, peripheral vision loss, a blind spot, or blurred vision.

Blindness is not always total vision loss – it exists on a spectrum. Partial blindness is very poor vision. Complete blindness, when you cannot see or detect light, is very rare. When a person is legally blind, they have 20/200 vision or worse, which means that they must be at least 20 feet away from an object that a person with normal vision could see from 200 feet away. Color blindness means that someone sees colors differently, not that they cannot see.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

How common are vision problems?

Vision problems are common and can happen to anyone. According to the CDC, about one million Americans (including adults and children) experience some form of blindness.

What should I do if I suspect my child may have vision problems?

Talk to a medical provider. A simple vision check can help find out what's going on.

What kind of help is there for vision problems?

Common treatments for vision impairment and blindness include:

- **Medication:** Some forms of blindness are caused by eye infections that can be treated with medicine.
- **Surgery:** Problems like cataracts, cornea damage, and damaged retinal tissue can be improved or fixed with surgery.
- **Assistive tools:** Tools such as screen readers, audio books, braille, magnifiers, and large-print materials can help with learning and daily tasks.

What other conditions sometimes occur with vision problems?

Some people with vision problems have other conditions such as developmental delays, autism, neurological disorders, or deafblindness (both hearing and vision loss). Be open with the medical provider about all symptoms and concerns.

Talking with a Medical Provider

When talking with medical providers or specialists, you might want to:

- **Bring notes:** Lack of eye contact, trouble reaching for objects, and unusual eye movements are all signs of low vision in young children. Sharing what you and others notice is important.
- **Ask questions:** Talk about what treatments are available and if you should see an eye specialist. Optometrists handle general eye care. Ophthalmologists are doctors that treat more complex eye problems.
- **Discuss next steps:** If the eye exam is normal but problems continue, ask about seeing a neuro-ophthalmologist who specializes in how the brain and eyes work together.

What You Can Do at Home

Getting medical help can take time. There are things you can do while you wait, including:

- **Get services:** Children under age three may qualify for Early Intervention, which is free. School-age children may get school-based supports through special education services.
- **Connect with others:** Finding other parents dealing with similar issues can be a huge source of information and support. Online peer groups online may also offer guidance and community.
- **Use the 20-20-20 rule:** Every 20 minutes, look at something 20 feet away for 20 seconds to help prevent eye strain from screens.

Learning about vision problems and getting help is a journey. You're not alone.

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About This Series

This series of handouts on health conditions was written by clinicians in Weill Cornell Medicine's Pediatric Mental Health Integration Program, partners in the ACT for Youth CYSHCN Program Center of Excellence at Cornell University.

