

CENTRAL CONNECTICUT HEALTH DISTRICT

SERVING THE TOWNS OF BERLIN, ROCKY HILL AND WETHERSFIELD

Central Office:
505 Silas Deane Highway
Wethersfield, CT 06109
Phone (860) 721-2822 Fax (860) 721-2823

Berlin Office:
240 Kensington Road
Berlin, CT 06037
Phone (860) 828-7017 Fax (860) 828-9248
www.ccthd.org

Rocky Hill Office:
761 Old Main Street
Rocky Hill, CT 06067
Phone (860) 258-2770 Fax: (860) 258-2767

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You Are Never Too Young for An Eye Exam

May is Healthy Vision Month. At least 14 million Americans have eye problems that interfere with activities of daily life. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, visual impairment is among the 10 most frequent causes of disability in this country. While efforts must continue in the areas of preventing eye injuries, developing new treatments and rehabilitation therapies, and emphasizing the importance of regular eye examinations to promote early detection and treatment of eye disorders, educating the public about the need for regular eye exams for infants and children is another goal which must be met.

Unless there is a glaring problem that we cannot ignore, most of us are not aware of current recommendations for vision screening for infants and children. During the infant and toddler years, children learn how to see and how to use their vision skills, which are so important for optimal development of cognitive and motor skills as they grow. The American Academy of Ophthalmology recommends that newborns be checked for general eye health before leaving the hospital by their pediatrician. Newborns with a family history of eye problems, those born prematurely, and those with obvious irregularities should be examined by an eye specialist called an ophthalmologist. General eye health should continue to be checked at routine well-baby examinations throughout their first years of life, and by age 3 1/2, pediatricians should test children for visual acuity and screen them for eye health. The Academy further recommends that doctors evaluate vision and eye alignment of their young patients by age 5; if difficulties are apparent, a referral should be made to an ophthalmologist. After 5 years of age, annual vision checks at school or pediatric appointments should be the norm. Obviously, when symptoms of eye problems appear (such as squinting or frequent headaches), a child should be examined by an ophthalmologist no matter what the age. And children who wear eyeglasses or contact lenses usually require annual eye exams to take corrective action as the child grows and the eyes change.

Even very young children will usually manifest symptoms of eye problems. Parents would be wise to consult an eye doctor if their children demonstrate any of the following behaviors or signs:

- constantly rubbing one or both eyes
- appearing to be extremely sensitive to light.
- difficulty following an object with the eyes.
- chronic tearing or redness of the eyes.
- difficulty focusing on an object.
- the eyes are not properly aligned after 6 months of age.
- a white, instead of black, pupil.

Once the child reaches school age, additional symptoms may become obvious:

- difficulty seeing objects at a distance.
- inability to read the chalkboard at school,
- difficulty reading,
- squinting.
- sitting very close to the TV or computer.

When parents, teachers, or school nurses discover a child exhibiting any of the above symptoms, a referral to an ophthalmologist is in order. Children's vision can be affected by a number of conditions, such as nearsightedness or myopia (poor distance vision), farsightedness or hyperopia (poor near vision), astigmatism (an imperfect curvature of the front of the eye that causes blurriness), lazy eye or amblyopia (lack of development of central vision in one eye and is often associated with crossed eyes), and strabismus, which is a misalignment to the eyes (they may turn up, out, in, or down). All of these conditions can be treated with eyeglasses, patches, surgery, or vision therapy.

Children can also be the victims of more serious eye problems. Retinoblastoma is a malignant tumor, which usually appears before the child is 3 years old, retinopathy associated with premature birth, infantile cataracts in newborns, and congenital glaucoma resulting from incorrect or incomplete development of drainage canals. These conditions usually occur in babies having a family history of these disorders, and require immediate treatment.

To be successful as students, as athletes, as fully functioning human beings, children need to maintain good eye health. It is up to the adults in their lives to ensure that happens by scheduling regular eye examinations, even for the youngest of children.

Further information about eye health is available by contacting the American Optometric Association at 1-314-991-4100 or on the Internet at www.aoanet.org. For more information about children's eye health, visit www.kidshealth.org on line. Additional information about this and other health topics is available at the Central Connecticut Health District at 860-721-2822 or www.ccthd.org.