

Eye focusing problems in young people

This leaflet is for young patients and their parents/carers and explains what may be causing your eye focusing problem and how to manage it.

Introduction

Eye clinics around the country see lots of young people who are troubled by blurred or double vision, although medical tests show that their eyes are healthy and they don't need glasses. Sometimes the natural focusing mechanisms seem to 'get in a muddle' so that people over, or under, focus for a task such as reading or looking at white boards, phone or computer screens etc. Other people appear not to be able to see normally during a typical eye test, however more detailed tests prove they have normal vision. This can obviously be very worrying for the individual and for their parents.

You have been given this leaflet because we want you to understand why and how you or your child might be getting the symptoms they are.

What is "normal" vision?

Many believe that most people have crystal clear vision and that blurred vision is always 'abnormal'. Recent research, including some from the University of Reading <https://research.reading.ac.uk/childrens-vision/>, reveals that that is not always the case. Many people live with a bit of blurred vision for quite a lot of the time. Focusing naturally comes and goes; and a lot of people only focus really accurately when they need to – such as when reading tiny text. The rest of the time they must actually have blurry vision. This may seem normal so therefore many people never notice it and think nothing of it.

Focusing is generally an automatic system – and in fact it often gets in a muddle the more we think about it. So, for example, instead of relaxing in the distance as it should do, your focus starts to do too much and causes intermittently blurry distance vision. 'Focusing problems' (not caused by any eye disease or abnormality) are a lot more common in people who are more sensitive and aware of what is going on in their bodies than others.

How the problem typically works

Symptoms usually get more noticeable when someone has flagged up the blurred vision as not being normal. This may be a parent, teacher, or a health professional, such as an optometrist or GP. You may have been sent to optician for an eye check because of problems during school work. Once you 'enter the medical system' with an onward referral to the hospital, the problem might even get worse. What has now become 'a problem'

takes up more of your attention. It is very common to worry that you might have something seriously wrong, such as a nasty eye disease, or be going blind or mad, or to worry about what would happen if it was to get worse and you couldn't manage something important. This is called 'catastrophising',

As a result of this, very often you or your parents (very understandably) may have started doing various things to try to deal with the blurry vision, such as repeatedly checking or asking about your vision. Then you start trying too hard to focus, blinking, staring, asking for reassurance, or looking online for answers. We call these actions 'safety behaviours'. Although they are designed to try to relieve the problem, they often make things a lot worse and create a vicious cycle. This is because they keep the attention on the problem and can even make you believe that something bad will happen to your vision if you don't do these things.

What triggers these eye focusing problems?

Some people have repeated short episodes after a specific trigger, such as having to read from an electronic screen or whiteboard, or after reading tiny, close print. Others may experience blurry vision when they become generally anxious – and may have other signs such as increased heart rate, tight chest, feeling sweaty or sick. Having blurred vision to worry about, *as well* as all these things, is likely to make things even worse! For some young people this might be part of a broader anxiety problem (e.g. excessive worrying or panic attacks). Sometimes, there can be clearly identifiable triggers, such as schoolwork or exam stress, friendship issues, pressure to live up to high expectations, bullying, dyslexia, or all sorts of family upsets or worries. Sometimes, quite a small worry can start it all off. You and your family may well be able to work out what it might be – so talk about it with anyone you trust so that you can get the support or help you need.

So what can we all do about it?

- The first thing to understand is that **we have checked that your eyes are normal, and we are confident that there is nothing medically wrong.**
- This eye focusing problem is really common – we see people like you every week!
- Often, just being reassured that lots of people experience what you do, but they just don't think or worry about it, is enough for you to start to get better.
- Try not to think about whether your vision is blurry or not – focusing happens best when it is automatic. The more you think about it, the worse it often gets – so go for a walk or do something you enjoy (probably not involving a tiny screen though!).
- We sometimes suggest some very simple eye exercises, eye drops or temporary glasses if we think they would help – but we'd rather not and often don't!
- Eye focusing problems always settle down eventually, but you might need to break habits (or 'safety behaviours') that have become part of your day, and which might actually be making things worse. Avoid thinking about your eyes every time you look at a screen, board or book; checking how clear it is 'just in case'; worrying about 'what might happen if it's bad when I need to do...'. If you are a parent, try not to keep asking your child how their eyes are.

- If you know anything is making you worried or stressed then try to avoid that situation. If you cannot, then talk to someone about it and come up with a plan for ways to deal with the worry.
- We find that it usually helps your symptoms get better quicker if another appointment isn't looming in the future, so don't be surprised if we don't offer follow-up appointments. However, we will always see you again if you feel you really need to come back. Try to give it a few months of 'getting on with your life' before coming back.
- If you feel that you are experiencing anxiety, stress or depression and this is getting in the way of your life, it is important to seek professional support. Often seeing your GP can be a good starting point. Please visit the Anxiety and Depression in Young People AnDY Research Unit website ([see below](#)) for how to access professional support or self-help materials that your whole family can use at home.

Further information

Anxiety and Depression in Young People (AnDY) Research Unit

<https://research.reading.ac.uk/andy/>

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RBFT Orthoptic Department, October 2019

Review due: October 2021