

My 12-year-old son was just diagnosed with amblyopia. I feel terrible that he sees so poorly in one eye and we missed it until now. Is there anything we can do?

Although catching amblyopia before age 5 years is ideal, research over the last 2 decades has shown us that vision can get much better with treatment well into later childhood and even adulthood.

Amblyopia is a problem where the brain isn't paying attention to one eye, or sometimes both eyes, as much as it should. Amblyopia happens when vision is blocked or blurry for a time during a childhood. This is usually because vision is out of focus and glasses are needed, especially if only one eye is blurry.

Another common cause is strabismus, or eye misalignment. With strabismus, the eyes aren't pointing in the same direction. If the child is paying attention to both eyes, he sees double. The brain adapts over time by ignoring one eye and amblyopia develops.

Less common causes of amblyopia are things that block vision, like a cataract, droopy eyelid (ptosis) or scar on the front surface of the eye from an injury.

Whatever the cause of the amblyopia, the first thing to do is remove the cause. This usually means wearing glasses. Remember, vision won't be perfect right away. The good news is that for many kids, vision improves quite a bit in a few months just by wearing glasses. In some kids, glasses are the only thing that is needed.

For most kids, the brain needs a little extra nudge to pay attention to the amblyopic eye. Vision might get better with glasses wear, but over time it levels out and doesn't get quite as good as the other eye. If this happens, or if vision is quite poor to begin with, patching or eye drops may help.

For a few hours every day, your son might wear a patch over the better eye. The patch looks like an oval bandage and can have fun pictures like soccer balls or ducks. He would still wear his glasses and do normal activities like read or play computer games. This gives his brain time to rely on the amblyopic eye. Patching can usually be done at home since only a couple of hours are needed.

Another common treatment is a medication called atropine. You would put a drop of atropine in his better eye two days in a row each week. This makes the pupil large (dilated) and near vision blurry. Most of the day, he would use his eyes together. When he reads or looks at anything close, the better eye would be blurry from the drop so his brain would need to pay attention to the amblyopic eye. Sunglasses may be worn outside since he would be more sensitive to the sun.

Either patching or atropine are very effective for most kids and your doctor other options as well. Some kids prefer one over the other, but both are well accepted. Keep up with regular visits to your optometrist or ophthalmologist to check progress, make changes as needed, and to watch for vision slipping backward after treatment stops. Make sure he keeps wearing glasses if they were prescribed; not just while you are treating his amblyopia but even after vision gets better. This helps keep all of that progress you made!

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