



Nystagmus

This information sheet from Great Ormond Street Hospital explains the causes, symptoms and treatment of nystagmus and where to get help.

Nystagmus is a rhythmical, repetitive and involuntary movement of the eyes. It is usually from side to side, but sometimes up and down or in a circular motion. Both eyes can move together or independently of each other.

A person with nystagmus has no control over this movement of the eyes.

What causes nystagmus?

Early onset nystagmus will appear in very young babies. It can also be called congenital nystagmus. Acquired nystagmus is when the condition appears later in childhood.

The condition might be caused by a developmental problem of the eye or brain, or the pathway between the two. Sometimes the condition can be caused by a stroke or head injury. The majority of children with the condition do not have any other health problems. When the cause is unknown it is called idiopathic. Some forms of nystagmus can be inherited.

What are the signs and symptoms of nystagmus?

The most obvious sign that a child has nystagmus is their eye or eyes will be moving randomly. The child may not be aware of this.

Children with nystagmus often have poorer vision and problems with balance. They will also find it more difficult to follow fast movements.

How is nystagmus normally diagnosed?

The condition can be diagnosed by various eye tests. These will include a normal sight test and monitoring their eye movements.

Nystagmus is defined according to the direction of movement of the eyes, how far they move and how often. Both eyes can move together or independently of each other.



How is nystagmus normally treated?

There is no cure for nystagmus.

Sight problems, such as long or short sightedness are common in people with nystagmus. Glasses will not cure the condition, but can help with reduced vision.

Large print books can help and will be especially useful for children learning to read. Extra time in school tests may be needed as reading the questions may take a little longer.

There is often a 'null point' where the eye movement is reduced. This can sometimes involve holding the head at an awkward angle, but it will help improve vision. Sometimes the eyes can be operated upon to reduce the awkward head posture (angle).

There are some authorities who advise operating on certain types of nystagmus to improve the quality of vision. Certain strict criteria must be met by eye movement recording before such procedures can be undertaken.

What happens next?

Each case of nystagmus will vary in severity and symptoms and reduced vision is common.

Children with nystagmus will need extra support and time to read. But this does not mean that they are unable or have learning difficulties. They simply have a challenge to overcome and it will take extra effort.

Children with nystagmus may feel self-conscious. This means it is important to build up their confidence.

Further help and advice

Talk to the child's doctor or health visitor.

Contact the Nystagmus Network – a self-help group run by people affected by nystagmus.

Nystagmus Network

Tel: 0845 634 2630

Website: www.nystagmusnet.org

Notes

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