

The vision snatchers

THOUGH rare, children can develop eye diseases that are more common among adults such as glaucoma and cataract.

However, as their eyes are different from those of adults, preschoolers or children below the age of six are more susceptible to a different set of eye ailments.

Amblyopia

Commonly known as lazy eye, amblyopia happens when an eye does not develop complete vision. Unilateral amblyopia affects only one eye while bilateral amblyopia affects both eyes. It is not a disease itself but is caused by underlying conditions.

“When an eye produces blurry vision, the brain starts to ignore the image formed by that eye and focuses on the clearer image produced by the other eye.

“If this goes on for long, the eye with the hazy vision will completely lose its ability to form images,” explains Dr Sunita Padmanabhan, consultant ophthalmologist at Columbia Asia Hospital – Petaling Jaya.

The *Segamat Paediatric Eye Disease Study*, jointly conducted by the Malaysian Health Ministry and South East Asia Community Observatory under Monash University Malaysia, reported that among a sample size of 1,287 children between the ages of four and six, the prevalence of amblyopia stood at 7.53%, of which 66% had bilateral amblyopia.

Astigmatism

A condition in which objects both near and far appear blurry, astigmatism is caused by an irregular curvature of the cornea of the eye. The light entering the eye cannot

focus on a single point on the retina, resulting in the indistinct vision.

While the blurred vision can be corrected with glasses, there are no ways of preventing it.

Myopia

A myopic or nearsighted eye is one that can focus clearly on objects that are near but produces a blurred image of a distant object. Symptoms include squinting or having to go extremely close to focus on an object.

Myopia can be easily corrected with glasses, but early detection is necessary to prevent progression to amblyopia.

Hyperopia

Commonly known as farsightedness, it is the opposite of myopia. A hyperopic eye can easily focus on distant objects but creates an unclear image of nearby objects.

Although babies are typically born with a little hyperopia, it tends to lessen with age.

Similar to myopia, farsightedness must be diagnosed early and corrected with the use of glasses or it can lead to complete loss of eyesight.

Dr Norazah Abdul Rahman, consultant and paediatric ophthalmologist at Ara Damansara Medical Centre, clarifies, “Astigmatism, myopia and hyperopia do not cause blindness themselves. However, early detection is necessary to stop the progression to amblyopia.”

As parents, it is imperative that you do not ignore the signs and bring your child to a paediatric ophthalmologist for regular check-ups.