

EARLY START FOR HEALTHY EYES

Experts say it is almost never too early to set your sights on ensuring your baby's eye health. Early detection and intervention can resolve many optical conditions before they affect young vision and well-being.

Dr. Nana Owusu, of Prairie Eye Care in Winnipeg, says the Canadian Association of Optometrists (CAO) recommends babies have their first eye exams between the ages of six and nine months.

"This is an important time to ensure that the eyes are healthy, eye and muscle movements and alignment are developing properly, and the eyes are focusing properly together," he says. "The next eye exam should be done when the child is around three years of age and then, annually thereafter.

"Fortunately, Manitoba Health covers the cost of eye exams for kids up to, and including, 18 years of age and no referral is necessary."

Owusu says early testing is very important as some visual impairments can become harder to manage, or may even worsen, if not treated as early as possible.

Conditions such as nearsightedness, farsightedness, astigmatism, lazy eye, bacterial infections and allergies can usually be diagnosed in their early stages. A doctor of optometry can also assess eye muscle function and eye movement

ability, colour and depth perception and other aspects of eye health that may not be readily apparent to mom and dad.

Intervention could be as simple as prescribing a pair of glasses. When you consider that 80 per cent of a child's learning is visual, the importance of early eye care comes sharply into focus.

Parents should be on the lookout for signs of vision problems in young children, such as eye rubbing, squinting, eye turning inward/outward, consistently closing an eye, holding objects close to the face, avoiding tasks requiring focus, or frequently turning or tilting the head. Light sensitivity or itchy, watery eyes may also signal a potential problem.

"Family members or teachers can often notice these kinds of signs," says Owusu. "But some issues can be difficult to assess without the use of equipment. Ultimately, it is always smartest to visit a doctor of optometry whether you suspect an eye health issue or not, so that your child's eyes can be properly evaluated."

The CAO recommends a comprehensive eye test performed by a qualified doctor of optometry as the best bet to promoting children's eye health, as these exams are much more thorough than general eye screening done in stores or in schools.

Owusu says children do not typically "grow



DR. NANA OWUSU CONDUCTS AN EYE EXAMINATION.

PHOTO BY DARCY FINLEY

out" of vision problems, so parents are wise to seek proper testing at appropriate age intervals for their child.

There is no need for parents to dread the appointment either, because Owusu and his colleagues strive to make children's eye exams as stress-free, and even fun, as possible. Very young children may not yet know their ABCs, so there are stand-ins for the traditional letter-centric eye chart.

"Sometimes, we will use the chart of letters much like we do for adults, though sometimes we use a chart of numbers or pictures," says Owusu. "Beyond the vision charts, there is a lot of objective testing that can be done to accurately determine a patient's visual and ocular health

needs. For infants and young children, we gain much of our information from the use of different lights which help determine a need for glasses, and help evaluate eye muscle function and general eye health. In my offices, we try to make children feel as if they are playing a game to relieve any potential anxiety and increase their comfort level."