Is worsening of nearsightedness (myopia) preventable? [1]

Dear Alice,

How do you prevent your eyes from getting more nearsighted? Is there a way?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Although nearsightedness is difficult to stop before it develops, it may be possible to slow the rate of increased visual impairment over time. Nearsightedness, or myopia, is a common eyesight condition in which a person is unable to see objects farther away but easily sees items close to them. For example, those with nearsightedness may have trouble seeing a movie in a theatre, reading the presentation slides in class, or reading road signs while driving. Anatomically, nearsightedness is due to a steeply curved cornea or a long eye, forcing light to gather in front of the retina rather than on the retina itself. This may be caused by environment or genetics, but the research isn't conclusive. Working with an eye specialist [2] can help determine the most appropriate treatment (more on this in a bit) to slow the rate at which vision gets worse.

Individuals whose nearsightedness arises during childhood often experience a more rapid worsening of the condition than those whose nearsightedness arises during adolescence or after age 20. There’s also evidence to suggest that there’s a higher prevalence of nearsightedness in younger people, such that 40 percent of 20 to 59 year olds and 20 percent of those 60 and older report having the condition. Working on tasks that require close-up eye concentration, such as reading, writing, and using computers [3] puts individuals at higher risk for developing myopia, although research is still determining why this occurs.

To try to slow down myopia, the first step is to consider scheduling an appointment with an optometrist or ophthalmologist who can help examine and diagnose the condition. Based on the diagnosis, they may suggest an appropriate treatment that allows for clear vision and slow myopia progression. Depending on what needs to be corrected, certain types of contacts and glasses have been found to be effective at slowing myopia, and for children and adolescents, topical treatments such as atropine and pirenzepine have also been found to be effective.

If a person with myopia is looking for long-term correction, laser-assisted-in-situ-keratomileusis
(LASIK) surgery is a procedure that uses a laser to reshape the cornea, thereby correcting vision impairments. Though it’s a more expensive option in the short-term, recent developments in the LASIK procedure are now also able to help people with serious astigmatism (poor vision usually due to a problem with the shape of the cornea) see clearly. If the LASIK procedure sounds appealing, it’s best to have a complete consultation with a trained, reputable, and certified LASIK surgeon to determine eligibility and learn more about possible side effects, such as blurry vision and problems seeing at night.

In addition to corrective eyewear, topical treatments, or LASIK surgery, health care providers may suggest regular eye exercises. While this isn’t considered a method of treatment for myopia, as little research has shown improvement for patients with myopia through eye exercises, these can help the eyes focus at different distances, relieving eye strain that many people with myopia experience. If you’d like to learn more about eye health, point your peepers at the Eyes [4] category in the Go Ask Alice! General Health [5] archives.

Here’s to more clarity,

Alice!
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