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Media Contact: Dave Sonntag
Desautel Hege Communications
(509) 444-2350
Karen Preston, O.D.
(425) 885-6600

Amblyopia is Stealing Children's Vision

Early detection is crucial in treating serious vision problems like amblyopia in young children

According to the Optometric Physicians of Washington, vision disorders are the number one handicap condition facing children. In the case of amblyopia, or "lazy eye," a child's vision can be permanently stolen if undetected or left untreated. Unfortunately, statistics indicate many children are slipping through the cracks of vision screenings and are not receiving the care necessary to prevent amblyopia and other vision problems.

Amblyopia and strabismus, a condition that often leads to amblyopia, develop in approximately five percent of young children. However, only 14 percent of children currently receive a comprehensive eye examination by age five (United States Center for Health Statistics).

Amblyopia, often called "lazy eye," is the term given to reduced vision in one eye as a result of the eye not receiving adequate use during early childhood. Most often it results from either misalignment of a child's eyes or a large difference in image quality seen with the two eyes. If amblyopia is not diagnosed near age three and treated by approximately age seven, it can permanently steal a child's vision by suppressing, or "shutting off" the vision in the effected eye.

"Too many vision problems are going undetected in young children," says Karen Preston, O.D., Co-Chair of the Washington Children's Vision Coalition. "Even if an infant receives a vision screening, we urge parents to schedule a comprehensive eye examination with an eye care professional by six months of age."

The vision screenings performed by pediatricians during regular infant check-ups measure for limited distance vision and can detect abnormalities in need of further attention. Comprehensive eye examinations performed by doctors of optometry or ophthalmology use advanced technology to measure vision at all distances, eye formation, color recognition, eye-hand coordination and visual alignment as well as diagnose eye diseases such as cataracts.

Research questions the effectiveness of vision screenings. For instance, a study in *Pediatrics* reports pediatricians did not perform vision screenings on one-third of children. In addition, the *Journal of Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus* reports that 11 percent of children that passed a vision screening had a vision problem in need of correction.

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Because it is crucial that amblyopia is detected early, parents and teachers should watch closely for the following signs that may indicate amblyopia is present or may be developing:

- One eye that deviates (causing the eye to misalign)
- Cloudiness in one eye
- Signs or symptoms of near or farsightedness
- An astigmatism in one eye

The Optometric Physicians of Washington recommends children receive their first eye examination at six months of age. Providing there are no impairments that warrant further immediate testing, a second exam should be performed at age three. Yearly exams should take place in subsequent years, especially for school-aged children whose eyes can become stressed during school and athletic activities. Vision exams from infancy will prevent learning problems for children when they enter school.

The Optometric Physicians of Washington (OPW) is the professional association of Washington State optometric physicians. The OPW is comprised of 13 optometric societies throughout the state numbering approximately 600 private, corporate and HMO optometric physicians.

*The **mission** of the OPW is to advance, improve and enhance the vision care and eye health of the public and to promote the continued development of the profession of optometry.*

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