

# Mealtime Memo

*for Child Care*

## Keeping Children's Eyes Healthy!

The National Eye Institute (NEI) established May as national Healthy Vision Month. NEI is part of the National Institutes of Health and is an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. NEI established the National Eye Health Education Program (NEHEP) observance with the purpose of making vision a health priority. As a child care provider you may ask, "What does this have to do with me?"

Researchers have found that certain nutrients help with eye health by reducing the risk of certain eye diseases. This includes nutrients such as lutein, zeaxanthin, vitamin C, vitamin E, essential fatty acids, and zinc. These nutrients support eye health by reducing the risk of chronic eye disease and age-related macular degeneration. Foods such as green leafy vegetables, eggs, fruits, vegetables, nuts, fortified cereals, and sweet potatoes contain nutrients that reduce the risk of certain eye diseases (American Optometric Association, 2018). There is also evidence that vitamin C, also known as ascorbic acid, an antioxidant, could possibly lower the risk of developing cataracts and may slow the progression of age-related macular degeneration and visual acuity loss. Vitamin E is found in nuts, fortified cereals, and sweet potatoes. It is an antioxidant that protects cells in the eyes. Essential fatty acids not only maintain the integrity of the nervous system but also fuel cells and boost the immune system. They are part of a healthy human diet. Zinc is a helper molecule and is an essential part of the human diet. It helps to help bring vitamin A from the liver to the retina. The eye has a high concentration of zinc in the retina and the vascular tissue layer under the retina.



A young child's vision is very important, and there are many child care providers that offer screenings to children on a yearly basis. A screening is not an in-depth examination; however, screenings can show or indicate that a child may need to follow up with a more comprehensive exam.



Let's define the difference between a screening and a comprehensive eye exam. A screening takes about 5 minutes and can be performed by an individual who has been trained to give the screening. This could be a teacher at a center or a child care provider in a home. The person giving the screening should inform the parents if the screening could not be performed or the child appeared to have difficulties seeing while being screened. A more thorough procedure called a comprehensive eye exam is performed by an ophthalmologist or optometrist and may take 30 to 60 minutes. Parents may ask you as a provider, "When should I take my child to see the eye doctor?"

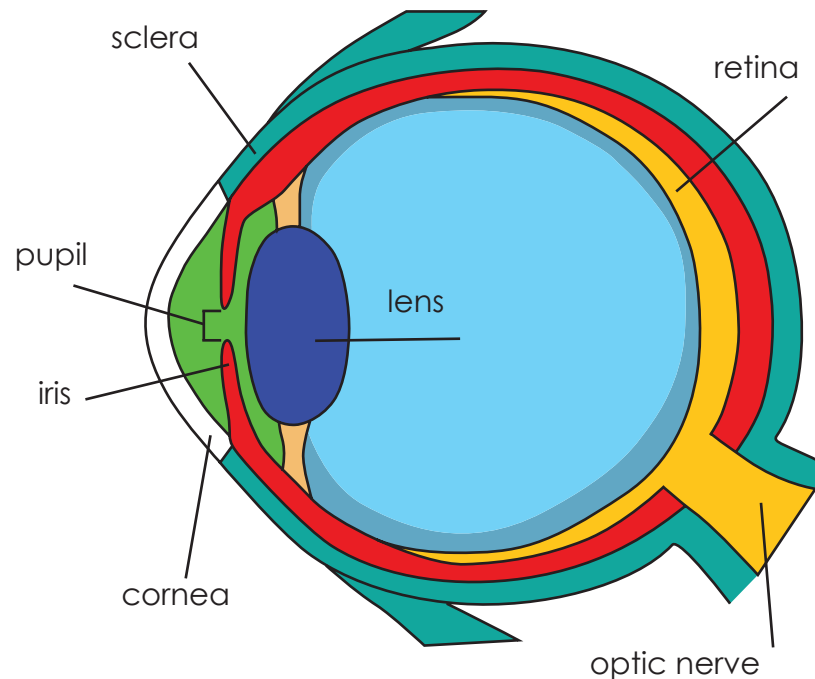
Eye exams should be part of routine care for children, starting in infancy and anytime there appears to be a problem with vision or perception of distance. This includes children that show signs of having difficulty seeing, such as sitting too close to the board. Have you noticed any of the children in your care sitting too close to the board in your room, or do they squint when they are looking at something or someone? If you have noticed any problems (like the ones just mentioned), the child should see an eye health professional right away.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, infants' eyes are checked before leaving the hospital, and it is recommended that an infant's eyes be checked again around 6 months as part of each wellness visit. The American Academy of Ophthalmology and the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend the following schedule:

When to Have a Child's Eyes Checked?	
Newborn	Screened before leaving the hospital.
By 6 months	Screened as part of a wellness check.
Starting at 1 to 2 years	Photo Screening (form of vision screening for children) is the use of a camera to take images of a child's undilated eyes.
At 3 to 4 years	Eyes and vision are checked for any abnormalities that may cause problems with later development.
At 5 years and older	Vision in each eye is checked separately every year. Children are referred to a pediatric ophthalmologist if necessary.

Adapted from: [healthychildren.org](http://healthychildren.org)

## Teach Children Different Parts of the Eye



**Eyelid:** protects the front of the eye. It limits light entering the eye and spreads tears over the cornea.

**Iris:** is the colored part of the eye. It regulates the amount of light entering the eye through the pupil.

**Pupil:** (PYOO-pul) is the opening at the center of the iris. The iris adjusts the size of the pupil and controls the amount of light that can enter the eye.

**Sclera:** (SKLEH-ruh) is the white outer coating of the eye.

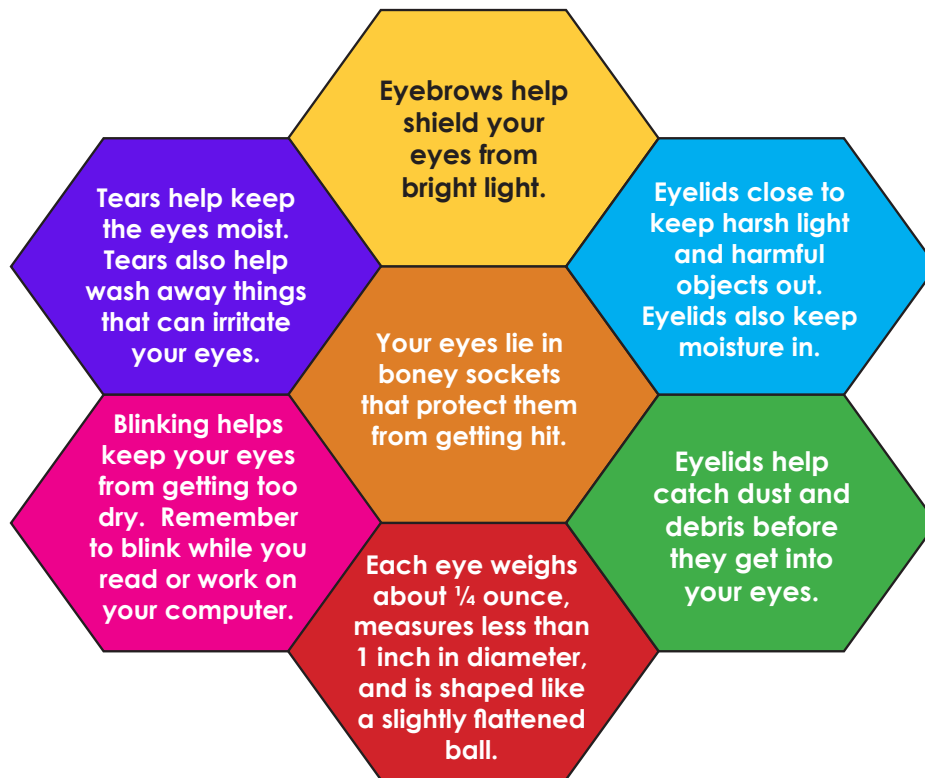
**Optic nerve:** (OP-tic nurv) is the bundle of more than 1 million nerve fibers that carry visual messages from the retina to the brain.

**Retina:** (REH-tin-uh) is the light-sensitive tissue lining the back of the eyeball. It sends electrical impulses through the optic nerve to the brain.

Before checking children's eyes at the center or home, teach them about their eyes' natural defenses.

Adapted from: <http://kidshealth.org/en/kids/eyes.html#>

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Adapted from: National Eye Institute [https://nei.nih.gov/kids/your\\_eyes\\_natural\\_defenses](https://nei.nih.gov/kids/your_eyes_natural_defenses)

Connecting Nutrition to Eye Health	
Lutein & Zeaxanthin	Lutein and zeaxanthin are important nutrients found in green leafy vegetables, as well as other foods, such as eggs. Many studies show that lutein and zeaxanthin reduce the risk of chronic eye diseases, including age-related macular degeneration and cataracts.
Vitamin C	Vitamin C (ascorbic acid) is an antioxidant found in fruits and vegetables. Scientific evidence suggests vitamin C lowers the risk of developing cataracts. Also, when taken in combination with other essential nutrient, it can slow the progression of age-related macular degeneration and visual acuity loss.
Vitamin E	Vitamin E is a powerful antioxidant found in nuts, fortified cereals, and sweet potatoes. Research indicates it protects cell in the eyes from unstable molecules called free radicals, which break down healthy tissue.
Essential Fatty Acids	Fats are a necessary part of the human diet. They maintain the integrity of the nervous system, fuel cells and boost the immune system. Research shows omega-3 fatty acids are important for proper visual development and retinal function.
Zinc	Zinc is an essential trace mineral or "helper molecule". It plays a vital role in bringing vitamin A from the liver to the retina in order to produce melanin, a protective pigment in the eyes. Zinc is highly concentrated in the eye, mostly in the retina and choroid, the vascular layer lying under the retina.

Adapted from: <https://www.aoa.org/patients-and-public/caring-for-your-vision/diet-and-nutrition>

During this spring season, children typically spend more time in the sun. Sunny days are great for outdoor activities. As a precautionary measure, encourage parents to have their entire family (including children) wear sunglasses. They protect the eyes from the sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays, which can damage your eyes. Pick sunglasses that block 99% or 100% of both UVA and UVB radiation. If a child does not like wearing sunglasses, try using a hat with a brim.



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