Crossed eyes: The silent vision threat

Often dismissed as a harmless childhood phase or a cosmetic concern, strabismus is a medical condition that can quietly lead to permanent vision loss and serious social consequences if left untreated.

BY BEATRICE NAKIBUUKA

In many Ugandan communities, a child with crossed eyes is often brushed off with the phrase, "they will outgrow it," or teased with unkind names. Among adults, the sudden turning of an eye may be blamed on stress, spiritual causes or dismissed as a cosmetic issue. Yet medically, crossed eyes are neither trivial nor rare. Known as strabismus, this condition affects how the eyes work together and, if left untreated, can quietly rob both children and adults of good vision, confidence, and opportunity.

Dr Elizabeth Nagawa, an ophthalmologist at Kiruddu National Referral Hospital, says strabismus occurs when the eyes look in different directions. One eye may look straight ahead while the other turns inward, outward, upward or downward.

"Strabismus is a condition where both eyes do not align properly. The eyes are controlled by small muscles that move them in different directions, guided by signals from the brain. When these muscles or their control systems do not work in harmony, the eyes stop moving together," she explains.

Squinting in childhood

Strabismus is classified into several types based on the direction of the eye turn, but for most families, understanding when it starts is even more important. Broadly, strabismus can appear in infancy or childhood, or it can develop later in life.

Strabismus that appears before the age of five is often referred to as infant or childhood strabismus. Parents may first notice it in a baby whose one eye seems to look away. In neonates, mild eye drifting can be normal as the brain learns to coordinate vision and often disappears within the first few months of life.

"However," Dr Nagawa warns, "persistent eye deviation is not normal and should never be ignored. The most common causes in children include developmental problems with the eye muscles, genetic tendencies and congenital conditions such as Down syndrome."

Poor vision itself can also lead to squinting, according to Dr Franklin Wasswa, an oculist at Entebbe Grade B Hospital. A child who cannot see clearly may strain to focus, causing the eyes to become misaligned.

"When one eye constantly turns away, the brain may begin to ignore images from that eye to avoid confusion. Over time, this can lead to amblyopia, commonly known as lazy eye, where vision in the affected eye fails to develop properly. This vision loss can become permanent if not treated early," Dr Wasswa says.

He reminds parents that all children should have their first comprehensive eye examination by the age of four. If a child develops a new eye deviation later in childhood, it requires urgent attention, as it may signal retinoblastoma, a childhood eye cancer.

In adulthood

Unlike childhood strabismus, eye deviation that begins in adulthood is almost always a sign that something is wrong. Adults often notice sudden double vision, dizziness or difficulty focusing, and some describe feeling disoriented, especially when walking or driving.

In many cases, adult-onset strabismus is linked to neurological or structural problems. These include stroke, head injury, brain tumours, eye tumours or damage to the nerves that control eye muscles. Long-sightedness that is not corrected with glasses can also strain the visual system, eventually leading to misalignment.

Dr Wasswa explains, "If any eye deviation happens during adulthood, it must be investigated because most of the causes are usually connected to the brain or structural defects causing damage to the muscle that moves the eye."

Parents or caregivers are usually the first to notice crossed eyes in children. Dr Nagawa notes that a baby may consistently turn one eye inward or outward. A preschool teacher may report that a child squints when looking at the blackboard, tilts their head or struggles to concentrate. Some children close one eye in bright sunlight or complain of tired eyes.

In adults, double vision is the most common complaint, sometimes accompanied by headaches, eye strain or a spinning sensation. Reading becomes difficult, and concentration suffers. Because the change may be sudden, it can be frightening and disruptive.

While strabismus can affect anyone, certain groups face a higher risk. Children with a family history of crossed eyes are more likely to develop it. Premature babies and those with neurological conditions are also vulnerable. In both children and adults, uncorrected vision problems are a major risk factor. Refusing or delaying the use of prescribed glasses forces the eyes and brain to work harder, increasing the likelihood of misalignment.

Adults who have suffered a stroke, head trauma or other neurological illnesses are at particular risk. In these cases, crossed eyes are not just an eye problem but a sign of broader health challenges.

Beyond vision, strabismus affects how people live, learn and work. For children, poor eye alignment can interfere with reading, writing and sports. Depth perception suffers, making activities such as catching a ball or navigating uneven ground more difficult. In the classroom, this can translate into poor performance and low self-esteem.

Socially, children with noticeable eye misalignment are often teased, which can affect confidence and emotional development. Adults may struggle with eye contact, leading to misunderstandings in personal and professional interactions. Employment opportunities can also be limited, especially in jobs that require good depth perception.

Treatment options

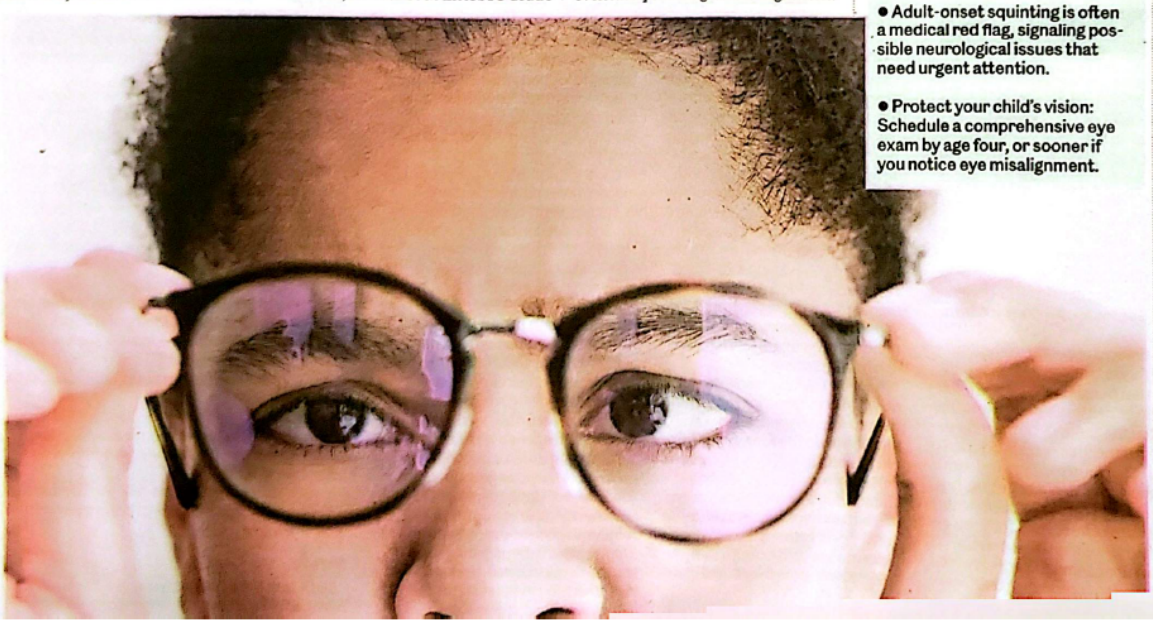
Strabismus is treatable, especially when detected early. In Uganda, the most common and often most effective treatment is correcting underlying vision problems with eyeglasses. For many patients, simply wearing the right prescription allows the eyes to realign naturally. The cost of basic corrective glasses can be Shs250,000, depending on the type of lens used.

Other non-surgical approaches include vision therapy exercises, prism lenses that help align images and, in some children, eye patching to strengthen a weaker eye. These methods aim to retrain the brain and eyes to work together.

Surgery is considered when other treatments fail to correct the alignment. Eye muscle surgery adjusts the position or strength of the muscles controlling eye movement. Modern procedures are minimally invasive and often done as outpatient operations. Surgery can d...

DID YOU KNOW?

- Strabismus affects about two to four percent of children worldwide. Early detection can prevent permanent vision loss.
- Eye exercises can help in mild cases by training the brain to use both eyes together.
- Glasses alone can realign eyes in some children, making early eye exams crucial.
- Adult-onset squinting is often a medical red flag, signaling possible neurological issues that need urgent attention.
- Protect your child's vision: Schedule a comprehensive eye exam by age four, or sooner if you notice eye misalignment.



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