

Orthoptic Department

Nystagmus

What is nystagmus?

Nystagmus is an unintentional jittery movement of the eyes.

Nystagmus usually involves both eyes and may get worse by looking in a particular direction.

What causes nystagmus?

Nystagmus can be found in families as an isolated problem, not associated with other conditions.

Some conditions are associated with nystagmus. Sometimes, the brain's control of eye movements is poor, resulting in an inability to look steadily at an object. Some forms of nystagmus are associated with reduced vision such as a problem with the retina or damage to the optic nerve. Rarely, nystagmus can occur as a result of brain tumours or in serious neurologic disorders.

If nystagmus is present, what should be done?

A thorough evaluation by an Ophthalmologist and sometimes other medical specialists is very important. Some forms of nystagmus have a definite cause. Important clues can be found depending on the age of onset, family history, general health of the patient, or the use of certain medications. Your Ophthalmologist may examine the pattern of the nystagmus, its speed and direction and look for other eye problems, for example: droopy lid, cataract, or an abnormality of the retina or optic nerves.



Can nystagmus be cured?

Very rarely, removal of the cause may improve nystagmus. In most cases, however, nystagmus is permanent. The reduced vision may be improved with glasses and low vision aids. The eyes may be more stable looking in a certain direction, so glasses with prisms or eye muscle surgery may improve the head position and allow better vision. Medications and eye exercises have rarely helped control nystagmus.

What are the most common forms of nystagmus?

Motor nystagmus (or **congenital idiopathic nystagmus**) tends to begin between birth and 3 months of age. Other family members may have similar unusual eye movements. The motion is usually horizontal. Often focusing up close or looking in a particular direction reduces the nystagmus intensity and improves the vision. Fortunately, patients do not see the world moving as their eyes move. Vision may be reduced at distance, but is often normal up close.

Sensory nystagmus (or **acquired nystagmus**) is associated with reduced vision caused by another factor such as cataracts. Sensory nystagmus usually begins at 6 to 8 weeks of age. The eyes appear to rove, sometimes slowly and sometimes quickly. Very often the eyes will also rotate upwards, and the eyelids may flicker as well. As your baby becomes older, he may poke at his eyes or wave his hand in front of them. Sometimes the cause for the reduced vision is treatable, as in babies who are born with cataracts. Other conditions may not be treatable. Nevertheless, understanding the underlying cause is of great importance to predict how your baby will do in the future.

What are other causes of nystagmus?

Medications or drugs can cause nystagmus. Rarely, this nystagmus can be associated with double vision and is often worse looking to the side. Medications such as those given for seizure control may cause nystagmus. Often, this will improve if the medication is stopped.

Patient Information

Voluntary nystagmus can be created by some people, much in the same way as ear wiggling. Fine, rapid, horizontal movements can be produced and sustained for a short period of time. Often this kind of nystagmus is used to gain attention.

Other professional involvement

The vision impairment team in the local area can provide support and extra help from nursery age onward through school life.

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this Information in another language or format please contact 024 76 96 6520 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

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