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Nearsightedness Has a Far-Reaching Impact As the Myopia Epidemic Spreads Around the Globe



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The world's vision is getting worse. And quickly.

That's the bottom line of an important new study from the Brien Holden Vision Institute on the prevalence of myopia. The statistics are frightening — myopia is projected to affect almost half of the world's population by 2050 — a sevenfold increase. By then, nearly five billion people will have the vision impairment with about one billion suffering from high myopia. In the United States and Canada, the number of myopes is estimated to climb to 260 million, or close to half of the population, up from 89 million in 2000; and high myopia cases jump an astounding five times to 66 million by the mid-century mark.

What are myopia and high myopia? Also known as nearsightedness, myopia is a refractive error that causes items close by to be seen distinctly but things in the distance are blurry. High myopia is a severe form of the condition in which the eye itself becomes too long and can lead to holes or tears in the retina or even retinal detachment.

“Two things are extremely concerning about these projections,” said Professor Kovin Naidoo, CEO of the Brien Holden Vision Institute and Vision Impact Institute advisory board member. “First, the accelerated growth of cases of myopia is incredible, which speaks to how our contemporary lifestyles are affecting our eye health. And second is that people with myopia, especially high myopia, are at higher risk to develop other vision disorders that can lead to vision impairment and blindness.”

Professor Naidoo said that one in 10 people worldwide will be at risk for permanent blindness by the year 2050 as high myopia especially increases the risk of cataracts, glaucoma, retinal detachment and myopic macular degeneration — all of which can cause irreversible vision loss. He also emphasized that more work needs to be done to improve the eye health of children, as they will be the adults suffering from myopia and perhaps related vision disorders in 2050. To address this, the Brien Holden Vision Institute and vision industry leaders have formed a campaign, Our Children's Vision, to accelerate and expand access to eye health services for more children in more locations.

Once thought to be only a matter of genetics, now researchers at the Brien Holden Vision Institute and elsewhere believe that lifestyle and behavior also play a role in the myopia epidemic. "The projected increases are widely considered to be driven by environmental factors (nurture), principally lifestyle changes resulting from a combination of decreased time outdoors and increased near work activities, among other factors," the study states.

Our 21st century lives are a significant factor as we've become addicted to smartphones, tablets and computers to keep us informed, entertained and organized. The Brien Holden Vision Institute study points to the under 40 age group — especially in Asia — as being extremely susceptible to myopia because of lifestyle changes such as the advent of these devices in the past 10 to 25 years. The competitive education systems in Singapore, Korea, Taiwan and China are another factor, according to the study, causing students to spend more time studying at computers.

Nearly 70 percent of Americans reported some form of digital eye strain due to prolonged use of electronic devices.

This myopia epidemic creates a significant public health problem around the world. The economic burden of uncorrected refractive error, largely caused by myopia, is estimated to be more than \$202 billion, and that number will grow as the epidemic spreads. It's affecting developing nations as well as the developed world. Unsurprisingly, the study shows that developed nations are seeing a faster rise in myopia because of increased urbanization and development.

The good news is that myopia can be corrected by a trained eye doctor prescribing eyeglasses, contact lenses or laser surgery. Also, we can change behavior to modify the risks that modern lifestyles put on our vision.

Foremost, get an annual comprehensive eye exam from an eye doctor. This is the first step in keeping your vision healthy and is especially important for children. Second, balance children's use of digital devices with time spent outdoors. Sunlight and being outdoors have been shown to mitigate the progression of myopia.

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