A person can begin to lose their eyesight at any age, and recognizing the signs and symptoms of vision loss is important to their eye health. An ophthalmologist at Baylor College of Medicine says noticing these signs is especially significant in young children because if certain eye problems are not addressed, it may impact their schoolwork or even
result in permanent vision loss.

"There is a period—approximately the first eight years of life –when the brain and the eye are learning to work together and the visual system is still developing," said Dr. Christina Weng, assistant professor of ophthalmology at Baylor. "During this time, parents should watch out for behavioral changes because they can be a sign of potential eye problems."

Behavioral changes can occur when children and young teens experience vision loss but are not able to voice their troubles and instead act out in the classroom or at home. It may even affect their grades, Weng said.

"When children have trouble seeing, they often act out or exhibit other signs of stress, and it can be challenging to determine the cause of their behavior. It is very helpful for parents to pay attention to what situations trigger their behavior," she said.

Parents can measure behavioral change related to vision impairment by evaluating several key questions, Weng said. Does my child become upset when watching a movie far away from the screen? Does he/she avoid reading or other forms of near work? Does she seem to ignore people or objects at a distance? Additional symptoms associated with vision loss include:

- Frequent headaches
- Excessive eye rubbing
- Holding a book, phone or tablet extremely close or far away
- Closing one eye to read
- Crossing, wandering or squinting of the eyes
- Behavioral issues/inability to focus
- Poor grades at school
- Child complains that he/she has difficulty seeing the board at
Although there may not always be a way to prevent vision loss, recognizing symptoms early can delay it or even avoid it altogether.

"Parents often ask me if sitting closer to the board, performing eye exercises or avoiding reading in the dark would help improve eye health. There really is no strong evidence to support this," Weng said.

However, she said there are several things anyone—adult or child—can do to prevent vision loss:

- Address any eye or vision problems immediately with your eye care provider—don't ignore them.
- Visit your eye care provider on a regular basis—this may be the only way to detect conditions such as glaucoma, which is asymptomatic in its early stages and can lead to permanent vision loss if untreated.
- Avoid trauma to the eye—always wear eye protection during activities where there is a risk of eye injury.

"The best way to prevent or delay vision loss from happening is early detection," she said.

If a child demonstrates any signs of vision loss, Weng suggests taking them to see an ophthalmologist for a complete eye examination. The sooner any eye issues are detected, the better the chance of salvaging or preserving good vision. Weng recommends eye screenings by a skilled eye care provider regularly throughout infancy and childhood:

- Newborn screening
- Six to 12 months
- 3 years of age
Periodically during school-age years

Weng also recommends some other best practices to help prevent myopia, or near-sightedness, which she said is a global epidemic particularly affecting younger populations.

"Myopia is associated with a higher risk of vision-threatening issues such as retinal detachment, and research is being done actively to find effective ways of prevention. There is evidence that reducing and taking frequent breaks from near-work (e.g., reading on a phone or tablet) and spending time outdoors may be helpful in curbing development of myopia in children and adolescents," she said.

"It is critical that children receive eye screenings throughout childhood because different problems can arise at different ages. While the exact frequency of exams varies depending on an individual's risk factors, the first screening should take place when the baby is a newborn. Subsequent exams are generally recommended at six to 12 months, three years of age, and then periodically throughout school age years. These evaluations can be performed by an ophthalmologist, optometrist or any skilled eye care provider trained in pediatric eye care," she said.

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

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