

Myopia

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October 3, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *Myopia*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=32749>

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Ophthalmology, Optometry, Public Health

1. Core Definition

Myopia, commonly known as **nearsightedness**, is a prevalent refractive error of the eye where distant objects appear blurred, while close-up objects are seen clearly. This visual impairment arises from the eye's inability to focus light precisely onto the retina, instead causing the focal point to lie in front of it. Individuals with myopia often find that while they can comfortably engage in activities requiring near vision, such as reading or intricate handiwork without corrective lenses, their ability to discern details at a distance is significantly compromised. This can manifest in difficulties recognizing faces across a room, reading road signs while driving, or seeing clearly during academic or professional presentations, necessitating optical correction for optimal distance vision. The severity of myopia can vary widely, from mild cases requiring minimal correction to severe forms that significantly impair daily functioning and may carry increased risks of other ocular pathologies.

The condition is distinguished from other refractive errors like **hyperopia** (farsightedness), where light focuses behind the retina, and **astigmatism**, which results from an irregularly shaped cornea causing blurred vision at all distances. Myopia is primarily characterized by the eye's shape or optical power, leading to an excessive bending of light rays entering the eye. This optical anomaly means that light from distant objects converges too strongly, forming an image that is sharp before it reaches the light-sensitive layer at the back of the eye. Consequently, by the time these light rays actually reach the retina, they have diverged again, resulting in a blurred or indistinct perception of objects located far away.

2. Etymology and Historical Context

The term "myopia" originates from ancient Greek, specifically from the words "myops," meaning "to close the eyes," and "myein," meaning "to shut," combined with "ops," meaning "eye." This etymology aptly describes the common behavior of individuals with nearsightedness, who often instinctively squint their eyes to partially block peripheral light rays and narrow the aperture, thereby attempting to improve their focus and achieve a clearer image of distant objects. This involuntary action helps to reduce the circle of confusion on the retina, offering a temporary, albeit limited, improvement in visual acuity for distant targets. The act of squinting is a characteristic coping mechanism that has been observed and associated with the condition for centuries, long before the underlying optical mechanisms were fully understood.

Historically, the understanding and correction of myopia have evolved significantly. Early

civilizations likely recognized the condition by observing individuals who struggled with distant vision, though their explanations were often rooted in superstition or simple observation. The development of optics and lens grinding in the Middle Ages, particularly with the invention of spectacles in the 13th century, marked a pivotal advancement. Initially, convex lenses were used to correct hyperopia, but the subsequent understanding of concave lenses, which diverge light rays, provided the first effective means of correcting myopia. Throughout the centuries, advancements in optical science, ophthalmology, and optometry have refined diagnostic methods and corrective solutions, moving from simple spectacles to sophisticated contact lenses and surgical interventions. The past few decades have also seen a surge in research into the causes and progression of myopia, particularly due to its increasing global prevalence, highlighting a renewed focus on understanding its pathophysiology and developing effective prevention and control strategies.

3. Physiological Mechanism

The human eye functions much like a camera, with the cornea and lens acting as sophisticated optical components that focus incoming light onto the retina. In a perfectly sighted, or emmetropic, eye, parallel light rays from distant objects are precisely converged by the cornea and lens to form a sharp image directly on the retina, which then transmits these visual signals to the brain via the optic nerve. Myopia fundamentally disrupts this delicate optical balance. The core issue in myopia is that the light rays converge too strongly, causing the focal point to fall short of the retina. This phenomenon results in a blurred image because by the time the light reaches the retina, the rays have already crossed and begun to diverge again, creating a "circle of confusion" instead of a crisp point of focus.

Several physiological factors can contribute to this premature convergence of light. The most common cause of myopia is an excessive axial length of the eyeball, meaning the distance from the front of the eye (cornea) to the back (retina) is greater than it should be for the eye's optical power. Even if the cornea and lens have normal focusing power, an elongated eyeball will cause the image to form in front of the retina. Another contributing factor can be an overly curved cornea or a lens that possesses too much refractive power, causing light to bend excessively as it enters the eye. Less frequently, myopia can result from a combination of these factors, where a slightly elongated eye pairs with a slightly too powerful lens system. Regardless of the specific anatomical or optical anomaly, the outcome is consistent: the light entering the eye from distant objects is brought to a focus point anterior to the retina, leading to the characteristic symptom of blurry distant vision.

4. Types and Classifications of Myopia

Myopia is not a monolithic condition but encompasses several distinct types, each with its own

characteristics and potential implications. The most common form is **simple myopia**, which typically develops during childhood or adolescence and stabilizes in early adulthood. This type is generally mild to moderate in severity and is usually corrected effectively with eyeglasses, contact lenses, or refractive surgery. Simple myopia is often associated with a slightly elongated eyeball or a cornea that is somewhat too curved, leading to refractive errors that typically do not exceed -6.00 diopters. It is largely considered a benign condition, though it still requires correction for clear vision.

A more serious classification is **high myopia**, defined by a refractive error of -6.00 diopters or more. Individuals with high myopia have significantly elongated eyeballs, which can stretch and thin the retinal and choroidal layers of the eye. This stretching dramatically increases the risk of serious ocular complications, including retinal detachment, myopic maculopathy (damage to the central retina), glaucoma, and cataracts, even at younger ages. High myopia is often progressive and requires careful monitoring by an ophthalmologist to manage these potential sight-threatening conditions. Related to this is **pathological myopia** (also known as degenerative myopia), which is characterized by progressive axial elongation and associated degenerative changes in the posterior segment of the eye, irrespective of the refractive error magnitude. These changes include lacquer cracks, choroidal neovascularization, and myopic foveoschisis, which can lead to severe and irreversible vision loss.

Other less common forms include **nocturnal myopia**, where vision is clear during the day but blurry at night, often due to pupil dilation in low light conditions causing spherical aberration; **pseudomyopia**, a temporary condition caused by excessive accommodation (spasm of the ciliary muscle) that mimics true myopia; and **induced myopia**, which can be caused by certain medications, changes in blood sugar levels (e.g., in diabetes), or nuclear cataracts. Understanding these different classifications is crucial for accurate diagnosis, appropriate management, and predicting the potential risks associated with an individual's specific myopic condition.

5. Causes and Risk Factors

The development of myopia is understood to be multifactorial, resulting from a complex interplay between genetic predispositions and environmental influences. Genetic factors play a significant role, as individuals with one or both myopic parents are statistically more likely to develop the condition themselves. Numerous genes have been identified through genome-wide association studies that are associated with refractive error and axial eye growth, suggesting a polygenic inheritance pattern. While genetics establish a susceptibility, they do not solely determine the onset or progression of myopia, underscoring the critical role of environmental factors.

Environmental risk factors have gained increasing attention due to the escalating global prevalence of myopia, particularly in urbanized and highly educated populations. Prolonged engagement in

near work activities, such as reading, studying, using computers, smartphones, and tablets for extended periods, is strongly implicated. The constant focusing required for close tasks is hypothesized to contribute to eye elongation. Conversely, spending insufficient time outdoors, particularly in natural daylight, is consistently identified as a significant risk factor. Studies suggest that exposure to bright outdoor light may stimulate dopamine release in the retina, which could inhibit eye growth, or that outdoor time inherently reduces near work and allows for more relaxed focusing. Lifestyle changes associated with modern education systems and digital technologies, which often involve less outdoor play and more screen time, are considered major contributors to the global myopia epidemic.

Other factors, such as socioeconomic status, diet, and certain medical conditions, are also being investigated for their potential influence. However, the primary drivers are widely recognized as a combination of genetic susceptibility and significant environmental pressures related to intensive near work and reduced outdoor exposure. Understanding these complex causes is paramount for developing effective strategies for myopia prevention and control, especially given the escalating public health challenge posed by its increasing prevalence worldwide.

6. Diagnosis and Progression

The diagnosis of myopia typically involves a comprehensive eye examination performed by an optometrist or ophthalmologist. A key component of this examination is the refraction test, where the eye care professional uses a phoropter or an automated refractor to determine the exact optical power needed to bring light into sharp focus on the retina. During this test, different lenses are placed in front of the eye, and the patient is asked to read letters on a distant eye chart (a Snellen chart). This process accurately measures the degree of myopia, expressed in diopters (D), a unit of optical power. In children, a cycloplegic refraction, which involves using eye drops to temporarily paralyze the eye's focusing muscles, may be performed to ensure an accurate measurement free from accommodative spasm, which could otherwise lead to an overestimation of myopia.

Beyond determining the refractive error, a thorough examination also assesses the overall health of the eye. This includes checking visual acuity (the sharpness of vision), examining the internal structures of the eye using an ophthalmoscope, and measuring intraocular pressure. For monitoring myopia progression, especially in children, regular measurements of the eye's axial length are becoming increasingly common. Axial length measurement, typically performed using optical biometry, provides an objective assessment of eye growth and is a crucial indicator for tracking the effectiveness of myopia control interventions.

Myopia typically emerges in childhood, often between the ages of 6 and 14, and tends to progress through adolescence as the eye continues to grow. The rate of progression can vary, but it usually

stabilizes in early adulthood (around 20-25 years of age). However, in some cases, particularly high myopia, it can continue to progress later in life. Regular eye examinations are essential, especially for children, to detect myopia early, monitor its progression, and intervene with appropriate management strategies to minimize the final degree of myopia and reduce the associated risks of ocular complications later in life. Early detection and management are crucial in mitigating the long-term impact of this widespread refractive error.

7. Management and Treatment Options

The management of myopia encompasses various strategies aimed at correcting the refractive error to improve vision and, increasingly, at slowing its progression, particularly in children. The most common and immediate solutions for vision correction are corrective lenses, specifically eyeglasses and contact lenses. Eyeglasses provide a simple, non-invasive method of diverging light rays before they enter the eye, ensuring that they focus precisely on the retina. Contact lenses offer a similar corrective effect but sit directly on the eye, providing a wider field of vision and often preferred for active lifestyles or cosmetic reasons. Both options effectively restore clear distant vision for the majority of myopic individuals.

For adults with stable myopia, various refractive surgeries offer a permanent solution to reduce or eliminate dependence on glasses or contact lenses. Procedures such as **LASIK** (laser-assisted in situ keratomileusis), **PRK** (photorefractive keratectomy), and **SMILE** (small incision lenticule extraction) involve reshaping the cornea using a laser to alter its refractive power, thereby correcting the focal point. For individuals unsuitable for laser surgery or those with very high myopia, implantable collamer lenses (ICLs) or refractive lens exchange (RLE) are alternative surgical options. These procedures aim to permanently correct the eye's refractive error by either adding a lens inside the eye or replacing the natural lens with an artificial one.

A significant focus in contemporary ophthalmology and optometry is on **myopia control**, especially in pediatric populations, to slow down the progression of myopia and reduce the risks associated with high myopia. Current strategies include low-dose atropine eye drops, which have been shown to effectively slow axial elongation. Additionally, specialized contact lenses, such as multifocal soft contact lenses and orthokeratology (ortho-k) lenses, are used. Ortho-k lenses are rigid gas permeable lenses worn overnight to temporarily reshape the cornea, providing clear vision during the day without corrective lenses, and have also demonstrated efficacy in slowing myopia progression. Lifestyle modifications, such as increasing outdoor time and reducing prolonged near work, are also strongly recommended as adjunctive measures to support myopia control efforts. These interventions aim to mitigate the long-term health risks associated with high degrees of myopia.

8. Societal Impact and Public Health Significance

Myopia represents a significant global public health challenge, with its prevalence increasing at an alarming rate across the world. Projections indicate that by 2050, approximately half of the world's population, or nearly five billion people, will be myopic, with around one billion of these individuals experiencing high myopia. This dramatic rise, often referred to as a "myopia epidemic," has profound societal implications, affecting educational attainment, economic productivity, and the overall quality of life for millions. The burden of uncorrected myopia is particularly high in developing countries, where access to eye care and corrective lenses may be limited, leading to substantial visual impairment that hinders learning and earning potential.

The economic impact of myopia is substantial, encompassing the costs of vision correction (glasses, contact lenses, surgeries), regular eye examinations, and the management of myopia-related complications. Beyond direct healthcare costs, there are indirect costs associated with reduced productivity, educational disadvantages for children with uncorrected vision, and the societal burden of preventable blindness and visual impairment. Furthermore, the psychosocial impact on individuals, especially children and adolescents, can be considerable, affecting self-esteem, participation in sports, and career choices. The increased risk of severe eye conditions like retinal detachment, glaucoma, and myopic maculopathy, particularly in high myopia, contributes significantly to irreversible vision loss and blindness, placing an additional strain on healthcare systems and individual well-being.

Addressing the myopia epidemic requires a multi-pronged public health approach that includes raising awareness, promoting early detection through school-based screening programs, and advocating for lifestyle modifications such as increased outdoor time. Research into effective myopia control strategies is critical, along with ensuring equitable access to affordable eye care and corrective solutions globally. The long-term societal well-being and economic prosperity of nations depend on effectively managing this growing vision crisis.

9. Ongoing Research and Future Directions

The escalating global prevalence of myopia has spurred extensive ongoing research aimed at better understanding its etiology, developing more effective prevention strategies, and refining treatment options. Current research endeavors are heavily focused on elucidating the precise genetic and environmental interactions that drive myopia onset and progression. This includes advanced genomic studies to identify new susceptibility genes, as well as epidemiological research to pinpoint specific lifestyle factors and their mechanisms of influence, such as the exact dosage and wavelength of light exposure required for optimal retinal health and the impact of various types of near work. These studies aim to move beyond correlation to establish causality, which is crucial for targeted interventions.

Future directions in myopia management are concentrating on personalized medicine approaches, where interventions are tailored to an individual's specific risk profile, genetic background, and rate of progression. This could involve advanced diagnostic tools that predict a child's likelihood of developing high myopia, allowing for earlier and more aggressive intervention. Novel pharmacological agents are also under investigation, exploring new pathways for controlling eye growth beyond existing treatments like atropine. Furthermore, innovative optical devices, including new designs of spectacle lenses and contact lenses that incorporate peripheral defocus management, are continuously being developed and refined to optimize their efficacy in slowing axial elongation.

Moreover, there is a growing interest in leveraging artificial intelligence and machine learning to analyze large datasets from clinical trials and real-world studies. This can help in identifying predictive biomarkers, optimizing treatment protocols, and enhancing our understanding of myopia progression patterns. The ultimate goal of these research efforts is to develop comprehensive, evidence-based strategies that can effectively stem the tide of the global myopia epidemic, reduce the burden of vision impairment, and prevent the long-term ocular complications associated with high myopia, thereby preserving vision and improving quality of life for future generations.

10. Debates and Criticisms

Despite significant advancements in understanding and managing myopia, several debates and criticisms persist within the scientific and clinical communities, particularly concerning prevention and control strategies. One area of ongoing discussion revolves around the precise mechanisms and optimal implementation of lifestyle interventions. While increased outdoor time is widely accepted as beneficial, the exact duration, intensity, and type of outdoor activity required for effective myopia prevention are still debated. Similarly, the specific thresholds for "excessive near work" and the most effective ways to mitigate its impact, such as the 20-20-20 rule or specific lighting conditions, remain subjects of active research and varying recommendations. Critics sometimes argue that without more precise guidelines, public health messages can be vague or difficult to consistently implement, leading to inconsistent outcomes.

Another point of contention lies in the application and long-term efficacy of pharmacological and optical myopia control interventions. For instance, while low-dose atropine eye drops have demonstrated efficacy in slowing progression, questions remain regarding the optimal concentration, duration of treatment, and potential side effects, such as light sensitivity or temporary blurring of near vision, which can impact compliance. Similarly, the long-term effectiveness and potential risks of orthokeratology lenses, particularly regarding corneal health and infection rates, are subjects of continuous monitoring and discussion. Critics emphasize the need for robust, long-term studies to fully understand the safety profiles and sustained benefits of these interventions into adulthood.

Furthermore, debates arise concerning the societal and educational pressures that contribute to the myopia epidemic. Some argue that modern education systems, which often prioritize extensive indoor academic work over outdoor activities, inadvertently fuel the rise of myopia. Criticisms are also directed at the pervasive use of digital devices, with discussions on whether screen time itself or the associated near focus and reduced outdoor activity is the primary driver. These broader societal debates highlight the complex challenge of addressing myopia, which extends beyond clinical interventions to require a re-evaluation of educational practices, urban planning, and public health policies.

Further Reading

[Myopia - Wikipedia](#)

[What Is Myopia \(Nearsightedness\)? - American Academy of Ophthalmology](#)

[Myopia \(Nearsightedness\) - National Eye Institute](#)

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