



## LOOKING AFTER OUR EYES

### THE IDEA

Eyes may become sore, infected or even blind if we do not care for them. This means keeping eyes and faces clean and free from flies, eating foods that are rich in vitamin A, and looking after eyes which have become infected or are threatened by disease.

Sight is important because we use our eyes for almost everything we do. Sometimes eyes cannot do their job because they are not properly looked after. Many eye problems are caused by:

- dirty faces which attract flies and germs.
- not eating enough food with vitamin A.
- a disease which can make us blind.

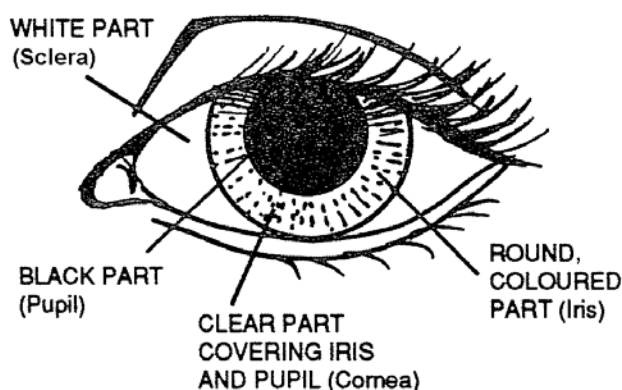
There are three ways to keep our eyes healthy and to prevent eye infections and perhaps blindness:

- Keep eyes and faces clean and free from flies.
- Eat food which is rich in vitamin A. Look after eyes which are infected or diseased.

If you look at an eye, you will see:

- the round, coloured part (iris)
- the black, centre part (pupil)
- the clear part (cornea) which covers the iris and pupil
- the white part (sclera).

### The eye



*Diagram of left eye*

The pupil lets in light, like a window, so that we can see. The eyelid helps to protect the eye itself, and keeps out light when we sleep. Tears, carried by the eyelid across the eye, wash away dirt and help to keep our eyes clean. That is why we blink. Eyelashes help to keep out dust, dirt and flies.

If an eye is healthy, the white part is clear, and the eye seems to shine.

### Where and how these activities have been used

It is very important for children to learn to keep the eyes of younger ones clean. The Child-to-Child reader **Flies** and the story 'Old Chicken Eyes' in the reader **The Market Dentist** both emphasise this in an amusing way.

It is possible to design entire Child-to-Child projects around the care of eyes and the prevention of eye disease. Components of such a project would be:

- An identification of eye conditions in a local area (often certain specific areas are affected).
- An enquiry into how these may be caused or treated.
- Campaigns specifically designed:
  - (a) to improve hygiene; (b) to improve nutrition; (c) to emphasise treatment ... related to this condition.

## Keeping eyes clean

### **Washing the face and eyes**

Children should wash their faces and around their eyes with soap and water every day, in order to keep eyes healthy and free of infection. Even if there is not much water, one cup of water for each child to wash is enough. If there is enough water for cattle and for cooking, there should be a cupful for the face. Water can be collected from the well or water-hole, or, if it rains, from the roof (a banana leaf draining into a bucket will catch enough).

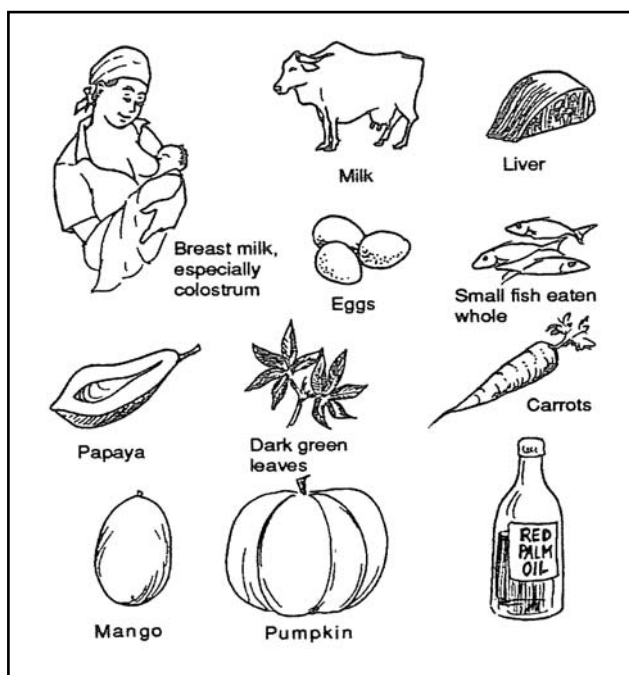
After washing the eyes, it is better not to dry them. Towels, cloths and clothes may carry germs and infection to the eyes.

### **Keeping flies away**

It is very important to keep flies away from the face and eyes. Flies like to feed on dirty eyes, sores and faeces. They fly from these to other children, and will carry germs into the eye, which can cause infection.

It is difficult for babies and younger children to keep flies away from their eyes. Older children can:

- wash young ones' faces and eyes.
- keep animals which bring flies away from the house as much as possible.
- bury rubbish and faeces, and dirty things that flies walk on.



## Eating good food

Vitamin A helps keep the eye healthy. Young children may become blind if they do not eat enough foods which have plenty of vitamin A. The first danger sign is when a child cannot see as well as healthy children in the dark. This is called 'night blindness'. If they still do not get food rich in vitamin A, the cornea may become cloudy and scarred, causing complete blindness. Such blindness can be prevented by eating foods which have plenty of vitamin A. Breastfeeding mothers also need plenty of vitamin A.

The following foods are good sources of vitamin A for young children:

Age 0 – 6 months	Breast milk
6 – 18 months	Breast milk + papaya or mangoes + dark green, leafy vegetables (e.g. spinach)
19 months – 5 years	Dark green, leafy vegetables + papaya or mangoes

Eggs, milk, liver, fish, fruit and vegetables are good for all children over six months old. Foods cooked with red palm oil are rich in vitamin A (see illustration, left).

**In many countries vitamin A capsules are distributed once or twice a year to all children between six months and five years old.**

## Eye infections

Keeping eyes and faces clean helps to stop infections of the eye which might be dangerous. What can children do if their eyes do become infected?

- If something like a bit of dirt or sand enters the eye, do not leave it there.

Infection and permanent damage may result later. Do not rub the eye. Visit the health worker to check for damage and to make sure that the dirt is out.

- If the eyes are red, sticky with pus, or swollen, clean them very carefully. Use a small piece of clean cloth and burn or bury it afterwards. Or use a clean finger, but always wash your hands immediately afterwards. Eye infection can easily be spread to others.
- If the eye is red, sticky or swollen, go to the local health worker or drug store as soon as possible. An antibiotic ointment (not one containing steroids) may be necessary. Take care when putting the ointment on. Ask advice about how to do this.
- If there is a little painful red lump on the edge of the eyelid, this may be a stye. Styes are not dangerous but can be very painful. Bathing with warm clean water can help ease the pain.

Remember:

- When a child or adult is having difficulty with seeing, go for help early.
- When a child's eyes are red and painful, go for help early.
- Some traditional eye medicines are dangerous and can lead to blindness. Only use those recommended by a health worker.

## Diseases causing blindness

Blindness can be the result of a disease.

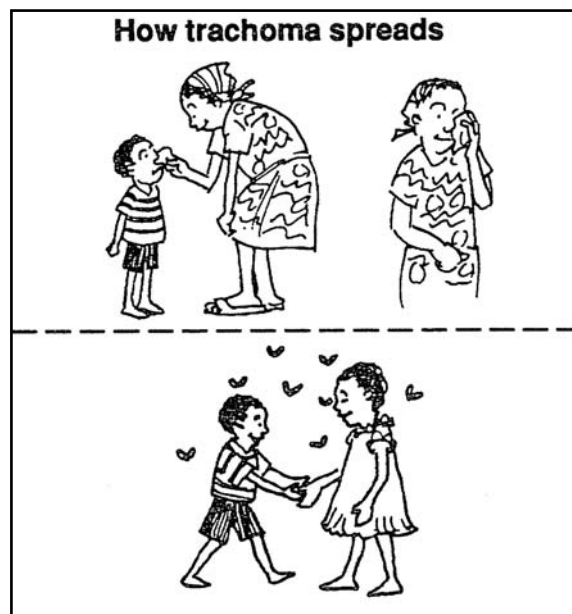
**Measles** A well-nourished child can fight diseases such as measles which cause blindness (see Activity Sheet 2.1 **Feeding Young Children**). If a baby has measles, it may feel more comfortable in a dark place for a few days. Feed the baby carefully with food that has plenty of vitamin A, and comfort it. Better still, get a vitamin A capsule from the health worker, as soon as you know it is measles. Watch the eyes. If they become sore with redness and pus, the child should be taken to the health worker.

### REMEMBER:

**It is easy to prevent measles.  
Get immunisation for the baby!**

**Trachoma** is an eye disease spread by flies and direct contact. It can be treated with an ointment, but the easiest way to prevent blindness from trachoma is to keep children's eyes clean. Wash them carefully and often. Keep flies away.

**Remember:** Complications of trachoma can cause blindness. Help to prevent it when the child is young. Get medical help as quickly as possible to stop the eye going blind.



**River blindness** is caused by tiny worms, spread by small black flies that bite. In areas where river blindness is a problem, there is little that children can do directly. In these areas, there will be local health programmes to fight the disease, and children should know about them.

## Blindness

If we do not prevent infections, fight diseases which can cause blindness and eat a healthy balanced diet, we may become blind ourselves. A few children are born blind. Others' eyes are blinded by accident, infection, disease, or poor diet. Among old people, blindness is also

common, due to cataracts. This can be treated by a simple operation.

We know that a person may be blind if they cannot count fingers held three metres away from their eyes. That person will probably need help. Blind children can be easily ignored and many die. They need extra help and care. There are many ways in which children can be useful.

## Activities

**Observing how the eye works** Stand in a room with sunlight coming in. (Don't ever look DIRECTLY at the sun.) One child can shade one eye with a piece of card. Another child can observe the size of the eye's pupil when it is in shadow. The first child can then remove the card quickly so that his friend can see how the size of the pupil changes when it comes into the sunlight. In this way, children can observe how the pupil lets light into the eye and helps us see.

Children can look at each other's eyes and draw what they see. They should notice and label the three main parts of the eye.

Ask the children to notice how a healthy eye looks. Is the white part clear? Does the eye shine?

**Getting rid of flies** Children can do many things to fight flies. First, they can find out where the flies come from. They can draw a plan of an area in the community and mark where the flies gather. Do they notice that they gather near animals? They can help to keep animals away from the house, wherever possible. They should also notice that faeces and rubbish attract flies. Encourage children to bury these.

Older children can compose songs and rhymes using a theme such as:

*Brush the flies  
From babies' eyes.  
Keep them away,  
Don't let them stay!*

They can also make fly swats for use at home using palm leaves, bamboo and local material.

Children can help most of all  
by keeping eyes clean.

**Keeping eyes clean** Older children can help younger ones at home to wash their faces and around their eyes with soap and water every day. Help to collect water which is needed for washing the face and eyes. Each child should have clean water. Why? Remember **not** to use a cloth or towel for drying the eyes. Why not?

Older children can work in pairs and inspect each other's eyes every day. Have they washed their faces and eyes? Have they washed the faces and eyes of younger brothers and sisters at home?

**Getting enough vitamin A** Children can learn to identify local foods that are rich in vitamin A. Such foods can help to prevent blindness. Draw colourful charts, pictures and posters of these foods. Collect and show local 'spinach-type' foods, or other dark green, leafy vegetables. Say which foods eaten at home contain vitamin A. Are they eaten regularly?

Make a list of all the vitamin A rich foods which small children in families like to eat. What food mixes containing these foods do they like best?

Teachers and extension workers can help children to make a garden to grow some of these plants. Older children can grow some near their home. Waste water from cooking and washing can be used to water these plants if rain is scarce.

**Understanding what it is like to be blind** One child can tie a cloth around the eyes of another. The second child can try to move around without being able to use his eyes. The first child can help him.

Several objects can be put in a deep bag. Children can place their hands inside and try to tell what the objects are without being

able to see them. Try to work with a blindfold over the face.

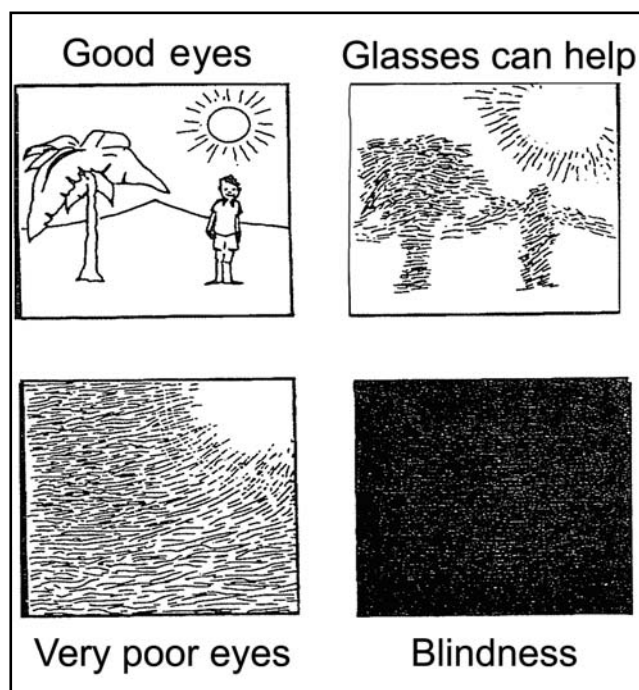
**Helping blind children** Older children can help children who are already blind by finding out where they live in the community. Does anyone help them? Older children can help to guide them to school. They can read them books, talk to them, help them to learn and include them in games and activities as often as possible. They can find out whether there are local facilities for the blind or for those who can only see a little. Do mobile eye clinics visit their area?

It is very important that children who see and hear well always play with those who do not.

**NOT ALL CHILDREN HAVE THE SAME DIFFICULTIES.**

Children can find out if there are blind people in the community and talk to them about how they went blind. A health worker can also help with information.

Some people have difficulty recognising shapes, some people can just see light and some are totally blind. Children can try and decide on the level of vision as shown in the diagram.



## Follow-up

Children can keep records to show that they have inspected their brothers' and sisters' eyes each day and helped them to wash.

Each child could write a story about helping another with an infected eye or poor eyesight. Or they could make a play – let one child act having measles, and the others can mime or describe what they did to help.

A competition can be held to draw a clear map showing where flies live locally.

Each class in a school could keep a record of the number of children with eye problems. Do the problems get less when children are older and cleaner?

Ask the children if they know any children who cannot see well. Are they doing anything to help? What are they doing?

## USING THIS SHEET

The health of children's eyes is of concern to everyone in the community. Many people can help:

- **Teachers** can introduce ideas for eye care in health and science lessons.
- **Health workers** can demonstrate good hygiene and talk about eye care programmes and vitamin A distribution.
- **Women's groups, youth groups and political groups** can help to mount education programmes.
- **Community workers** who help people who are already blind can say what they do.
- **Older children** can tell younger ones about eyes and why they must be kept clean, how they can wash their faces and eyes, and how they can kill flies.
- **Scouts, guides, children's groups and youth groups** can carry out projects in cooperation with adults, which will help to improve the health of eyes in the community.

Children can tell teachers, parents or other relatives about friends who have weak eyesight and make sure that they include them in their games.