Nystagmus

Nystagmus is a condition in which the eyes move involuntarily, typically in a rhythmic pattern.

Types and Causes of Nystagmus

Nystagmus can be categorized in different ways, including based on age at onset, type of eye movement, or specific cause.

There are 2 major categories of nystagmus related to when the disease occurs. Congenital nystagmus is present shortly after birth. Acquired nystagmus begins after 6 months of life. Congenital motor nystagmus is the most common type of congenital nystagmus. This usually occurs by itself, is not associated with any other congenital abnormalities, and does not go away but can lessen with time. Other causes of congenital nystagmus include developmental abnormalities in the eye structures, such as the cornea, lens, retina, and optic nerve, or abnormalities in the visual pathways in the brain.

Acquired nystagmus has several medical and neurologic causes, including certain medications, stroke, brain injuries or tumors, and diseases of the vestibular system. When vestibular organs are not functioning normally, the body has a difficult time balancing and may induce nystagmus. A clinician can evaluate for the different causes by taking a thorough history, by physical examination, and sometimes with blood tests and imaging.

Symptoms of Nystagmus

In congenital nystagmus, families typically notice involuntary eye movements in an infant. Congenital nystagmus affects visual development in children and can result in limited visual acuity. However, children typically do not experience vertigo (a spinning sensation) or oscillopsia (images moving side to side). Patients may also tilt or turn their head to see better or try to slow down the eye movements. In patients who develop nystagmus later in life, it can cause vertigo or oscillopsia.

Treatment of Nystagmus

Treatment of nystagmus depends on the underlying cause. For many types of congenital nystagmus, it is important to have a specialist evaluate the nystagmus, look for other causes of the nystagmus, and help maximize the patient’s visual development. Glasses or contacts are helpful for some patients. Strabismus surgery, an operation involving the muscles that control eye movements, is an option that may improve head position and lessen but not eliminate the nystagmus.

For patients with acquired nystagmus, medications can be used in some situations. In patients with nystagmus caused by medication, the nystagmus usually goes away after discontinuation of the medication. Treatment of the underlying medical or neurologic problem can also help resolve nystagmus in some patients.

For more information:

- American Academy of Ophthalmology
  www.aao.org/eye-health/diseases/what-is-nystagmus
- American Association for Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus
  aapos.org/glossary/nystagmus

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