

Kids get cataracts too

However, the condition is rare, with an incidence rate of about 15 cases per 10,000 children here. JOAN CHEW reports

There was something wrong with the baby.

Dr Leonard Ang could tell just by looking into his eyes.

Instead of a black pupil gazing back at him, there was an abnormal white reflection from the retina of the left eye.

Baby Justin (not his real name) had a rare condition - a childhood cataract. He was not even three months old.

Unlike in the elderly, surgery in such a young baby does not fully restore his eyesight, said the medical director of Singapore Medical Group's The Eye & Cornea Transplant Centre.

This is because a child who has cataracts normally has other inherent vision problems as well.

Dr Ang said: "Despite the removal of a cataract in a child, there is usually significant permanent visual loss from amblyopia, or lazy eye, refractive errors like astigmatism or long-sightedness, glaucoma and retinal detachment."

A cataract is a condition in which the natural clear lens of the eye becomes cloudy and reduces the amount of light entering the eye. Vision is affected as the cataract blocks out the light entering the retina.

It is the main cause of poor vision or blindness in adults over the age of 40.

For every 10,000 children here, there are perhaps one to 15 cases of childhood



PHOTO: STANDARD CHARTERED BANK

A child after his cataract surgery. If a child gets cataracts from birth, the condition may have occurred as a result of a viral infection such as rubella in the pregnant mother. In other cases of childhood cataracts, the problem may have resulted from severe eye injuries.

cataracts, said Dr Zena Lim, a consultant ophthalmologist at the Singapore National Eye Centre (SNEC).

Childhood cataracts can originate at birth or develop later. They can affect one or both eyes.

If a child gets cataracts from birth, the condition is congenital and this may be inherited, or arose from a viral infection such as rubella in the pregnant mother, a genetic disorder like Down's syndrome or certain ocular conditions associated with cataracts.

In other cases of childhood cataracts, the problem may have resulted from severe eye injuries.

It can also arise from systemic disorders. This is a condition affecting the body as a whole, as in juvenile arthritis or diabetes. Cataracts can also develop in childhood from conditions that require the long term use of oral steroids.

Dr Lim noted that most cases of childhood cataracts have no known cause. Not all cases of childhood cataracts will affect the vision, said Dr Ang.

If the cataract is small and confined to the peripheral part of the lens so that vision is not affected, patients are just monitored to see if the condition worsens.

However, if the cataract blocks the centre

of the lens so that vision is affected, surgery would be needed.

This should be performed when the child is below 12 weeks old "to ensure minimal or no visual deprivation", Dr Ang said. Most ophthalmologists operate within the first six weeks to minimise the risk of the child acquiring a lazy eye, he said.

Last year, the paediatric ophthalmology services at both SNEC and the KK Women's and Children's Hospital operated on 29 patients. The rest were monitored.

Unlike in adults, an artificial lens is usually not implanted into the young eye to replace the cloudy lens, said Dr Ang. This is because the eyeball is still growing and an artificial lens could affect its growth and development.

Instead, these children will wear glasses or contact lenses.

Dr Lim recommends that eye screening be conducted to pick up childhood cataracts. Those with a family history of childhood cataracts, or early onset of cataracts, as well as those with conditions requiring long-term treatment with oral steroids, should be screened.

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