

Double Vision (Diplopia)

If you see two versions simultaneously of an object that you are looking at, you may have a condition known as double vision, also referred to as diplopia. Double and blurred vision are often thought to be the same, but they are not.

There are two possible causes of double vision. The first is a refractive cause. Light from an object is split into two images by a defect in the eyes' optical system. Cataracts might, for example, cause such a defect. The second is failure of both eyes to point at the object being viewed, a condition referred to as 'strabismus' or "squint." In normal vision, both eyes look at the same object. The images seen by the two eyes are fused into a single picture by the brain. If there is a defect in the muscles which control the movement of the eyes or in the control of these muscles through the nerves and brain, then double vision can be a symptom.

Double vision can be extremely discomforting. In young children, the brain acts to alleviate the discomfort by suppressing, or blanking out, one of the images. If this suppression persists over a continued length of time, it can lead to an impairment of the development of the visual system.

The suppressed eye may get to the point where it is unable to see well, no matter how good the spectacle or contact lens correction. Doctors call this condition amblyopia. Since it is a result of a defect in the interpretive mechanisms of the eye and brain, it is more difficult to treat than a refractive condition (one having to do with the eyes' ability to bend light).

Treatment of double vision consists of prism glasses and/or surgical straightening of the eye, or a combination of the two.