# Student Corner • An Approach to Understanding Strabismus Diagnosis: Part 1

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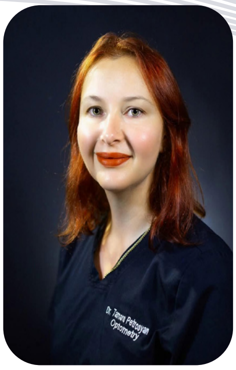

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## Introduction to Strabismus

Strabismus refers to a condition where, when both eyes are open, there is a deviation in the alignment of the visual axes, preventing simultaneous fixation on a single point in space: the eyes are not properly aligned. This misalignment disrupts normal binocular single vision (BSV), potentially leading to sensory adaptations such as suppression (where the brain ignores input from the deviated eye to avoid diplopia) or anomalous retinal correspondence (ARC, the brain's abnormal cortical remapping of visual direction). The condition can be quantified in prism diopters (Δ), with deviations classified as horizontal (most common), vertical, diagonal, or torsional.

Historically, strabismus was noted in ancient texts, such as Hippocrates' descriptions around 400 BCE of "squinting eyes" and their association with visual impairment. In the 19th century, Friedrich Donders (1864) advanced understanding by linking accommodative esotropia to uncorrected hyperopia, explaining how excessive accommodation triggers convergence excess. Claude Worth (1906) introduced the concept of an "innate compulsion for fusion," positing that strabismus arises from failures in this inherent drive during early visual development. Frederick Brock (1950s) elaborated on postnatal milestones, such as conjugate gaze by 2 months, bifoveal fixation by 3-6 months, and full stereopsis by 1 year, emphasizing how disruptions lead to maladaptive reflexes. Burian and Miller (1958) classified acute acquired comitant esotropia (AACE), categorizing it by triggers like fusion interruption, stress, or myopia. These historical contributions highlight the evolution from descriptive observations to mechanistic insights, with modern classifications building on these foundations to address both motor and sensory aspects.

At birth, perfect alignment is rare; studies of newborns show that only about one in four have aligned eyes, with the majority displaying exotropia, either consistent or occasional. This outward misalignment tends to resolve quickly within the first few months of life as binocular coordination improves. By around six months, most infants achieve stable binocular function, including depth perception. Esotropia often emerges between two and four months and becomes the dominant type. These patterns highlight that visual alignment is largely acquired through experience rather than being innate. Optometric practice (especially developmental and behavioral models) views many cases as issues in visual-motor learning and sensory adaptations to visual stress rather than primary muscle defects.

The "nature versus nurture" debate applies here, similar to amblyopia. Many deviations represent adaptations to visual demands, and diagnosis involves identifying these adaptations to inform management. Treatment aims to raise awareness of misalignment and to encourage perceptual reorganization, whether through therapy or other interventions.

## Developmental Aspects of Binocular Vision

Binocular vision develops as infants interact with their environment, integrating input from both eyes with motor feedback. Early experiences with solid objects help pair visual and tactile information, leading to depth perception (stereopsis) by approximately four months. Newborns are typically straight or outwardly deviated. Subcortical mechanisms, such as the vestibulo-ocular reflex (VOR), support alignment initially with perfect gain to stabilize images during head movement. By two months, infants learn to adjust VOR gain for intentional gaze shifts. Those with early deviations may struggle with this adjustment. Optokinetic nystagmus (OKN) starts asymmetrically (temporal to nasal) and becomes symmetric around three to five months, coinciding with stereopsis development.

Gross motor development influences ocular alignment. Conditions affecting overall muscle tone can impact eye muscles. Bilateral body control is foundational for binocular teaming, explaining why activities like chalkboard exercises, balance rails, and crawling are incorporated in management plans. Retained primitive reflexes, lack of body midline awareness, and postural imbalances, such as gait abnormalities or sway, are common in deviations. Long-term non-parallel alignments may lead to skeletal issues like scoliosis, requiring interdisciplinary care such as physical therapy or chiropractic care.

Strabismus is a condition characterized by misalignment of the eyes, resulting from multifactorial disruptions in the coordinated control of the six extraocular muscles and their neural pathways. It affects binocular vision, stereopsis, depth perception, and psychosocial well-being, with global prevalence of 2-5% in children and 0.5-1% in adults. Environmental modifiers (e.g., prolonged screen time disrupting fusional vergence) and comorbidities (e.g., thyroid dysfunction in 15% of acquired cases) exacerbate pathology.

Early detection and precise classification are essential, as treatment efficacy declines after the critical period of visual plasticity (typically before age 7-8 years), although treatment well into geriatric age is still effective. In children, esotropia is more prevalent, while exotropia is more common in the adult population. Differential diagnosis prevents misattribution, using a step-by-step algorithm to exclude mimics based on history (onset), exam (comitancy), and tests (restriction vs. paresis).

**Classification of Strabismus**

Classification systems are essential for etiological inference, diagnostic precision, and management planning. They are multidimensional, allowing for overlapping categories (e.g., a patient may have comitant, intermittent, partially accommodative esotropia with V-pattern, inferior oblique overaction, and DVD). Use this framework to structure history, examination, and diagnostic testing.

## Classification of Strabismus

| Dimension | Subcategory | Description / Details | Clinical Implications & Notes |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Age of Onset | Congenital / Infantile | From birth to six months. Early developmental dysinnervation or congenital anomalies. Early intervention is critical; monitor developmental milestones. | High risk of suppression, amblyopia, and abnormal binocular development. Screen siblings (10-15% risk). |
| | Early-Onset | Six to 36 months. Emerges during early visual maturation, often linked to refractive or neurological factors. | Often accommodative; monitor for decompensation into constant deviation. |
| | Later-Onset | After 36 months. Typically acquired, related to trauma, disease, or decompensation of latent deviations. Detailed history and consideration of imaging for acquired causes. | Red flags: older age, large angle (>$40^{\Delta}$), neuro signs ---> urgent neuroimaging. |
| Direction | Esotropia | Horizontal inward deviation with varied etiologies; accommodative types linked to hyperopia and high AC/A ratio. Horizontal misalignment due to medial rectus overaction or lateral rectus underaction. 36% fully accommodative, 17% non-accommodative, 10% partially accommodative, 8% congenital/infantile, 6.5% paralytic, 2% cyclic, 1% sensory. | Most common in pediatric strabismus (60% pediatric) |
| | Exotropia | Horizontal outward deviation; intermittent often decompensates under stress. Horizontal misalignment from lateral rectus overaction or medial rectus underaction. 60% intermittent, 40% constant. Strabismus control score assessment should be performed if intermittent. | 30% of cases; worsens with distance, fatigue, bright light; good initial control in intermittent form. |
| | Vertical | One eye turns upward (hypertropia) or downward (hypotropia), often non-comitant. Vertical misalignment often involves superior / inferior obliques or superior / inferior recti. Evaluate cyclovertical muscles and check for restrictive etiology. Upward deviation, often cyclovertical muscle-related. | 10% of cases; noncomitant in palsy/ restriction; comitant in skew. |

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| | Cyclotorsional | Torsional/rotational deviation, often 5-15° extorsion or intorsion. Results from oblique muscle imbalance or CNS issues, typically noncomitant. Maddox rod can be used for torsion angle evaluation. | Subtle; common in superior oblique palsy (5-15° extorsion). |
| | A- or V-pattern | Deviation changes with up/down gaze, not related to fixation distance, commonly linked to oblique muscle dysfunction. Grade overaction (1+ to 4+); evaluate secondary causes (e.g., superior oblique weakness). Use the Maddox rod for easy assessment of magnitude and direction.<br>• A-pattern often caused by overaction of superior obliques and shows more exo deviation on downgaze<br>• V-pattern often caused by overaction of inferior obliques and shows more exodeviation on upgaze.<br>• Upgaze exotropia/downgaze esotropia from superior oblique overaction<br>• Upward palpebral slant, linked to vertical rectus dysfunction.<br>• Upgaze esotropia/downgaze exotropia from inferior oblique overaction; downward slant, overelevation in adduction $15^{\Delta}$-$20^{\Delta}$.<br>• Extorsion (5-10° in superior oblique palsy), detectable in 9-gaze testing. | 10-$20^{\Delta}$ change; MRI may show rectus displacements. |
| Constancy | Constant | Always present, persistent deviation. | Higher amblyopia risk. |
| | Intermittent | Variable, not always present, often task-dependent (fatigue, near work). If intermittent, evaluate control score 0-5 at distance and near. Involves fusional breakdown, triggered by accommodation fatigue or attention loss. Perform extended observation or fatigue testing. | Vision therapy best treatment, surgery not indicated. |
| Accommodative Influence | Accommodative | Related to accommodative effort, often inward (hyperopia-driven). Driven by refractive-accommodation-convergence synkinesis, common in hyperopia >+3.00 D. Damp or cycloplegic refraction may elicit high amounts of latent hyperopia. Correction of refractive error resolves strabismus. May require an add to resolve near misalignment in presence of high AC/A. | Fully correctable in 36%; explain: "Glasses can fix this type completely." |
| | Non-accommodative | Independent of accommodative effort (paralytic or mechanical causes). Correction of refractive error does not influence alignment. | Surgical or observational; rule out sensory, neurologic, or restrictive causes. |
| | Partially accommodative | Mix of both accommodative and non-accommodative mechanisms. Combines refractive and non-refractive factors. Alignment improves with hyperopic refractive error correction but residual misalignment still exists. | Combine glasses + therapy or surgery if residual >20–$25^{\Delta}$. |

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| Comitance | Comitant | The deviation amount is consistent across 9 cardinal gaze positions (<5 prism diopters variation). Suggests central or refractive cause, uniform innervation across gazes. Test alignment in 9 cardinal gazes. A phoria that decompensates into a strabismus will result in a comitant deviation. A neurologic or mechanical strabismus will result in a non-comitant deviation. | Good therapy and surgical prognosis; central etiology. |
| | Noncomitant | Magnitude varies with gaze direction (>5 prism diopters variation), often due to muscle or nerve issues. Indicates peripheral issues like paresis or restriction. Consider forced duction and imaging for palsy/restriction. | May require forced duction, versions, imaging; poorer fusion potential. May require partial occlusion in the area of diplopia. |
| Laterality | Unilateral | Only one eye deviates. | Increases amblyopia risk. Monitor fixation preference. |
| | Alternating | Deviation switches between eyes. One eye may have preference for fixation. While binocularity might be impeded, alternating deviations do not produce amblyopia because at some point in time each eye individually has foveal fixation. | No amblyopia risk; binocularity often poor. Note which eye has preferred fixation for what percent of the time. |
| Fixation | Foveal | Monocular central fixation using the fovea, indicating normal retinal function. Supports good prognosis. | Provide best binocular refractive correction to optimize binocularity/stereopsis. |
| | Extrafoveal | Monocular fixation off the fovea (eccentric) associated decreased BCVA, suppression, and lack of RDS stereopsis. Visuoscopy to map stability, direction, and magnitude of eccentric locus. | Indicates dense amblyopia; poorer stereopsis prognosis. |

# Types of Strabismus

(Each type has unique etiological, clinical, and diagnostic profiles.)

## Horizontal Strabismus - Esotropia (Convergent, 60% in peds)

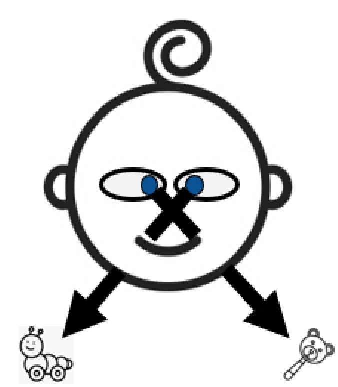
| Subtype | Prevalence | Onset | Angle & Pattern | Key Associations | Etiology | Diagnostic Clues |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Infantile/Congenital | 8% | <6 months | Large, constant (>$40^{\Delta}$) | DVD (50-70%), latent nystagmus (15-20%), amblyopia (50%) | Developmental dysinnervation | Early UCT shows manifest tropia; poor stereopsis/fusion; family history in 10-15%. |
| Accommodative | — | 2-4 years | Near > distance | Hyperopia >+3.00 D; high AC/A ratio (>6:1) | Refractive/accommodative synkinesis | Cycloplegia may reduce deviation by >50%; subtypes: fully (36%): resolves fully with correction; partially (10%): residual tropia; non (17%): no refractive link. |
| Acute Acquired Comitant Esotropia (AACE) | — | >6 years | >$40^{\Delta}$ distance | Subtypes: 31% accommodative, 27% decompensated phoria, 19% idiopathic, 6% intracranial | Fusion disruption | Red flags: older age, large distance angle, neuro signs --> neuroimaging. |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cyclic | 2% | 2-6 years | Cyclically occurs over 48-hour cycles | Family-linked | Unknown (circadian?) | Symptom diary; observe over days; alternating esotropia/ orthophoria. |
| Sensory | 1% | Any | Variable | Unilateral vision loss (e.g., cataract, corneal edema) | Sensory deprivation | VA asymmetry; Strong amblyopia risk. |
| Paralytic | 6.5% | Any | Non-comitant | CN VI palsy most common | Nerve lesion | Abduction deficit (85%). |

| | Infantile Esotropia | Accommodative / Partially Accommodative Esotropia | Acquired Esotropia |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age of Onset | • Birth - 6 months | • ~2 - 3 years | • Any |
| Refractive Error | • Rx independent; develop amblyopia if untreated | • Moderate to high hyperopia | • Any |
| Quality | • Constant<br>• Often alternating<br>• Comitant<br>• High magnitude 20-60$^{\Delta}$ | • Intermittent --> constant over time<br>• Often alternating<br>• Comitant<br>• Moderate magnitude 10-30$^{\Delta}$<br>• ET N>D if high AC/A | • AACE due to excessive near work --> comitant<br>• Paralytic / traumatic -->non-comitant<br>• Any magnitude ~15-45$^{\Delta}$ |
| Associated Findings | • (-) RDS / stereo<br>• (+) DVD<br>• (+) Nystagmus<br>• (+) Cross fixation | • High AC/A<br>• Centration point where patient can fuse can sometimes be found | • 6th nerve palsy<br>• Hx ABI, TBI, concussion |
| Prognosis | • Dependent on age of intervention | • Very favorable with early intervention of Rx / VT | • Dependent on underlying condition |

A side note about cross fixation: Cross fixation is a clinical hallmark of large-angle, constant, early-onset strabismus—most classically infantile esotropia—and represents a compensatory motor adaptation to absent or severely defective sensory fusion. In normal binocular vision, each eye fixates with its fovea on the same target. The left eye sees the left peripheral visual field and the right eye sees the right peripheral visual field. In large-angle esotropia (typically ≥40–60$^{\Delta}$) cross fixation develops and the child uses the left eye to fixate right-sided visual field targets and the right eye to fixate left-sided targets, without moving the head. With such a large deviation, the nasal retina of each eye is constantly stimulated by the temporal field, while the temporal retina receives little to no input. Lacking normal simultaneous foveal stimulation, the visual cortex never establishes binocular correspondence or fusional vergence control. Instead, the brain adopts a monocular spatial mapping strategy: the right eye's nasal retina becomes functionally linked to the left hemifield, and the left eye's nasal retina to the right hemifield. Clinically, this is observed as crossed fixation on cover testing—occluding the fixating eye causes no refixation movement in the deviated eye because it is already aligned for the opposite field.

So the right eye adducts (turns in) to fixate objects in the left visual field, and the left eye adducts to fixate objects in the right visual field. This pattern bypasses the need for abduction of either eye beyond the midline, effectively eliminating the temporal visual field of each eye from active use during fixation. The child develops a motor maladaptation to the visual world: To explore the nasal visual field (which is preserved due to the large esotropia), the child learns to alternate fixation using the adducted eye on the side of gaze: to look left, the right eye adducts further (fixates with its fovea). The temporal retina of each eye (which would normally see the contralateral field) gets chronically suppressed.



# Types of Strabismus

(Each type has unique etiological, clinical, and diagnostic profiles.)

### Horizontal Strabismus - Exotropia
### (Divergent, 30% in peds. IXT most common in adults.)

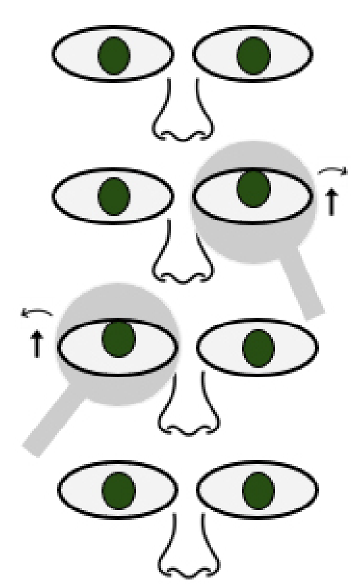
| Subtype | Prevalence | Onset | Angle & Pattern | Key Associations | Etiology | Diagnostic Clues |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intermittent | 60% | Distance > near | Good initially | Worsens with distance/fatigue/light | Fusional vergence weakness | ACT distance > near; reduced reserves; NPC >10 cm. |
| Constant | 40% | Basic (equal) or divergence excess (distance worse) | Poor | Amblyopia in 30-40% | Innervational or sensory | Large-angle (>30$^{\Delta}$) may show oblique pseudo-overaction. |
| Convergence Insufficiency | — | Near exotropia | — | Asthenopia; improves with VT (60%) | Vergence dysfunction | Low fusional convergence. |

### Vertical Strabismus (10%)

| Subtype | Prevalence | Presentation | Etiology | Diagnostic Clues |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dissociated Vertical Deviation (DVD) | 50-70% infantile esotropia | Unilateral/bilateral upward/outward drift on occlusion (emerges >2 years); latent nystagmus | Poor binocular fusion | UCT shows drift (5-20$^{\Delta}$ amplitude); no fixation preference. Latent manifestations during fatigue. 95% prevalence with amblyopia. Strong association with infantile esotropia and suppression. |
| Oblique Muscle Dysfunction | Common | Inferior oblique overaction (bilateral asymmetric, V-pattern, overelevation adduction 10-20$^{\Delta}$, graded 1+ to 4+); superior oblique overaction (A-pattern, overdepression). Etiology: Primary or secondary to antagonist weakness. | Primary or secondary | Versions grading; fundus torsion (extorsion 15° in inferior oblique). Pseudo-overaction in large-angle exotropia or TED. |

**A side note on Dissociated Vertical Deviation (DVD) in Infantile Strabismus**

DVD is most commonly associated with congenital or infantile esotropia, but it can also appear in other conditions like intermittent exotropia or rarely in isolation.



Key Characteristics

- *Appearance:* When one eye is fixating, the other eye (the non-fixing or occluded eye) spontaneously drifts upward, sometimes with slight excyclotorsion. The deviation can be intermittent or constant and may alternate between eyes.
- *Trigger:* It is elicited or worsened by covering the fixing eye, which dissociates the binocular input. Under binocular viewing, it may be partially suppressed.
- *Magnitude:* The upward drift typically ranges from 2-20$^{\Delta}$, though it can vary.
- *Age of Onset:* Usually presents in infancy or early childhood, often becoming noticeable between 6 months and 5 years of age.

The exact cause of DVD is not fully understood, but it is thought to involve an imbalance in the neural control of vertical eye movements:

- *Shared Pathways Hypothesis:* DVD may result from an abnormal connection or "cross-wiring" between the horizontal and vertical gaze centers in the brainstem (e.g., involving the posterior commissure or oculomotor nuclei). This leads to inappropriate upward movement when binocular fusion is disrupted.

- *Fixation Loss:* In congenital esotropia, poor early visual development may contribute to latent nystagmus or unstable fixation, exacerbating the deviation.
- It is not typically linked to cranial nerve palsies.
- DVD is benign in terms of vision-threatening effects but can contribute to sensory adaptations like anomalous retinal correspondence.

**A side note on Inferior Oblique Overaction in Infantile Strabismus**

Inferior oblique overaction (IOOA) is a condition where the inferior oblique muscle is hyperactive, leading to abnormal eye elevation. In the context of infantile strabismus (typically infantile esotropia, but sometimes exotropia), bilateral IOOA is a common associated finding that contributes to vertical or torsional eye misalignment. IOOA typically becomes evident by 1-3 years of age, often as infantile esotropia (diagnosed before age 6 months) progresses.

The inferior oblique muscle elevates the eye when it is adducted, contributes to excyclotorsion, and works in concert with other extraocular muscles to maintain binocular alignment. In IOOA, this muscle contracts excessively or inappropriately, causing characteristic bilateral (may be asymmetric) eye movements of excessive elevation on adduction, where the eyes are more convergent (esotropic) in downgaze. The obliques are weak abductors. Therefore, when inferior oblique muscles overact in IOOA and/or superior oblique muscles underact in SOP, it causes a relative divergence in upgaze compared to downgaze, resulting in a V-pattern esotropia.

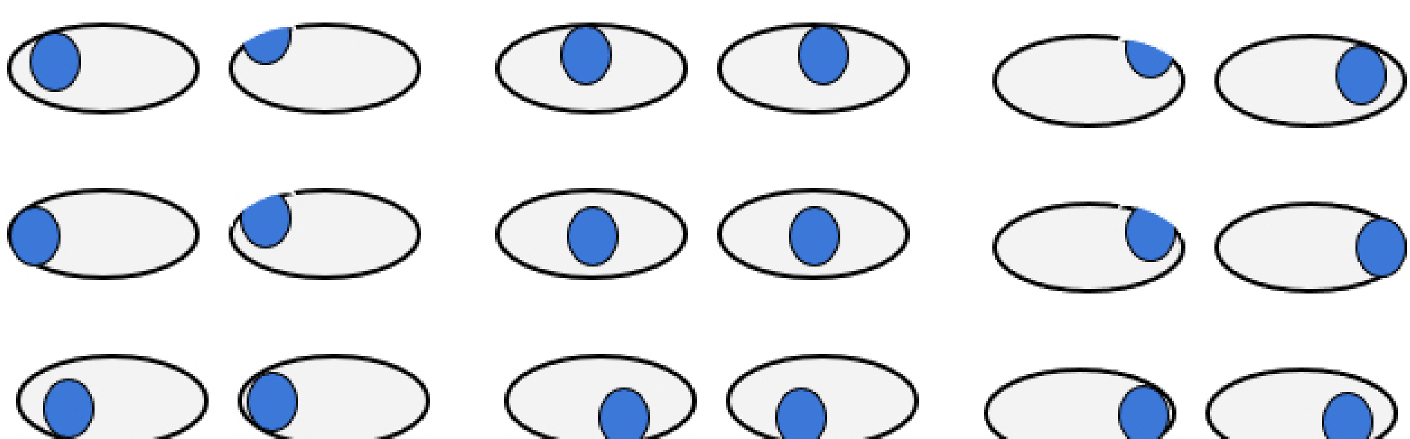
IOOA is often seen alongside dissociated vertical deviation (DVD), though the two are distinct: IOOA is more prominent in adduction, while DVD occurs independently of gaze direction and is triggered by occlusion / fixation.

The exact cause of IOOA in infantile strabismus is not fully understood but may involve:

- *Neuromuscular imbalance:* Abnormal innervation to the inferior oblique muscle, possibly due to developmental issues in the oculomotor system.
- *Compensatory mechanism:* In infantile esotropia, the brain may over-activate the inferior oblique to compensate for horizontal misalignment, leading to secondary vertical deviation.
- *Congenital factors:* IOOA is more common in congenital strabismus and may be linked to abnormal muscle anatomy or neural control.

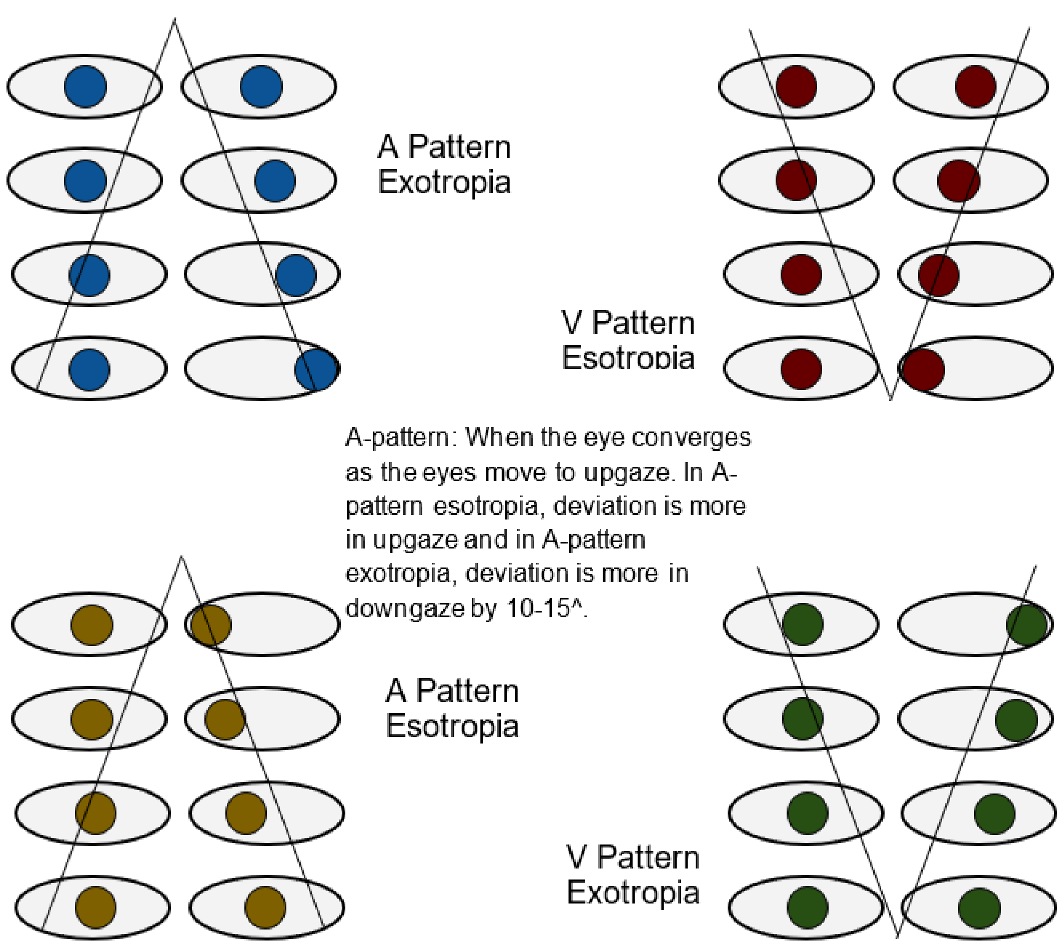
**Inferior Oblique Overaction (IOO) vs. Superior Oblique Palsy (SOP)**

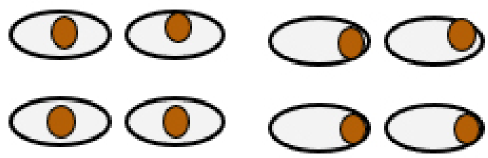
It is important to understand that when you have a palsy of one muscle (SOP), you are going to have an overaction of its antagonist (IO is antagonist to SO), so an SOP is going to look very similar to an IOO, it's just that the inferior oblique overaction is secondary to the superior oblique palsy vs. a primary IOO due to a congenital esotropia.



Left hyper on right gaze, right hyper on left gaze, no vertical deviation on primary gaze, V pattern eso

| Feature | Superior Oblique Palsy | Inferior Oblique Overaction |
|---|---|---|
| Hypertropia | Present in the affected eye, worse in adduction and when looking down. | Worse in adduction, but often bilateral and symmetric accompanied by infantile strabismus. |
| Gaze Dependence | More pronounced in adduction / contralateral gaze (e.g., right SOP worsens in left gaze) and when looking down (e.g., reading position); often associated with V-pattern strabismus. | More pronounced in adduction / contralateral gaze and when looking down; often associated with V-pattern strabismus (same as SOP) |
| Head Posture | Compensatory head tilt to the opposite shoulder (e.g., left tilt for right SOP) to minimize double vision. Hypertropia worsens when the head is tilted toward the affected side (positive Bielschowsky test). | Head tilt is less common; may occur to compensate for associated horizontal esotropia. Bielschowsky head tilt test typically negative. |
| Torsion | Excyclotorsion present due to unopposed inferior oblique action. | Excyclotorsion may be present, but less pronounced unless severe; often bilateral in infantile strabismus. |
| Laterality | Usually unilateral in congenital SOP; bilateral in ~15% of cases (often post-traumatic). | Often bilateral in infantile strabismus, though one side may predominate. |
| Associated Conditions | May occur in isolation or with cranial nerve palsies; congenital cases often linked to abnormal superior oblique tendon. | Commonly associated with infantile esotropia or dissociated vertical deviation (DVD); rarely isolated. |



| Syndrome | Prevalence | Key Features | Etiology | Diagnostic Gold Standard |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Duane Syndrome | 1-4% | Congenital dysinnervation; Type 1 (esotropia, limited abduction 10-15$^{\Delta}$, retraction); Type 2 (exotropia, limited adduction, up/downshoots 20%); Type 3 (both limited adduction and abduction)<br> | CN VI hypoplasia | Versions (co-contraction 95%); head turn 20-30°. |
| Brown Syndrome | 1% | Limited elevation in adduction; V-pattern/ downshoot; intermittent pain/click (20%)<br> | Superior oblique tendon restriction | Positive forced duction test; significant resistance to elevation in adduction due to the tight superior oblique tendon or sheath impeding eye's movement. |
| Thyroid Eye Disease (TED) | 10% | Restrictive strabismus; hypotropia/esotropia; proptosis (3-5mm), lid retraction/lag | (80% sensitivity) vs. will be negative in a palsy. | |
| Cranial Nerve Palsies | — | • CN III: Ptosis/mydriasis (60% acquired); exotropia/hypotropia; limited adduction/ elevation/depression. (+) Reversing Hypertropia.<br>• CN IV: Hypertropia worsening contralateral gaze/ipsilateral tilt; Bielschowsky head tilt test positive. Congenital: facial asymmetry, large vertical ranges >10$^{\Delta}$; Acquired: diplopia in downgaze/adduction.<br>• CN VI: Esotropia; abduction deficit. | Autoimmune myopathy | CT (muscle enlargement vs. isolated motility); thyroid panel. Restrictive myopathy with lid signs. |
| Other | — | • Sagging eye syndrome: Elderly distance esotropia from connective tissue degeneration; lateral rectus laxity.<br>• Heavy eye syndrome: High progressive myopia; axial elongation causes lateral and superior recti to dislocate; progressive esotropia/hypotropia with restrictions.<br>• Möbius: Bilateral esotropia with facial palsy.<br>• CFEOM: Severe restriction/ptosis, genetic (PHOX2A).<br>• Ocular myopathy: Primary muscle disease causing strabismus, not a cranial nerve dysfunction.<br>• Divergence insufficiency (10%): Elderly onset, esotropia at distance; comitant.<br>• Nutritional (5%): Vitamin A deficiency; reversible with supplementation. | Nerve lesion | Versions, Parks three-step with Bielschowsky head tilt, forced duction, MRI. |

## *Differential Diagnosis*

(Prevents misattribution using step-by-step algorithm)

### Common Mimics & Differentiation

| Mimic | Hallmark | Differentiation |
|---|---|---|
| Pseudostrabismus | Apparent esotropia from epicanthal folds, wide nasal bridge, or positive angle kappa (light reflex off-center). No true deviation on unilateral cover test; common in infants (resolves with growth by about age 5). | Symmetric Hirschberg; normal UCT/ACT (no refixation); normal motility/stereopsis. |
| Latent Phorias/Decompensated Phorias | Hidden deviations unmasked by stress; no manifest tropia. | ACT shows phoria only; good fusion on Worth 4-dot; low fusional reserves |
| Convergence Insufficiency | Near exotropia/esotropia with asthenopia; normal distance alignment. | Reduced NPC (>10 cm); fusional reserves low. |
| Divergence Insufficiency | Distance esotropia; normal near/motility. | No accommodative influence; absence of restriction. |
| Neuromuscular (e.g., Myasthenia Gravis) | Variable ptosis/diplopia worsening with fatigue, improved with rest/ice pack; no restriction. | Ice pack/Tensilon test positive (80%); negative forced duction. Fatigability. |
| Restrictive (e.g., TED) | Proptosis/lid signs; positive forced duction. | CT/labs; systemic symptoms (e.g., smoking worsens TED by 20%). Restrictive myopathy with lid retraction/proptosis. |
| Orbital Floor Fracture | Post-trauma vertical restriction; hypoesthesia/enophthalmos (2–5mm). "White-eyed" in pediatrics. | CT entrapment; positive forced duction, hypoesthesia; resolves post-repair. |
| Neurological (e.g., INO in MS) | Adduction lag/abducting nystagmus. | MRI demyelination; CSF analysis. Adduction deficit with nystagmus in abducting eye. |
| Skew Deviation | Supranuclear or infranuclear disruption, not a direct muscle or nerve palsy, causing variable vertical deviation. Hypertropia may alternate or vary with gaze direction. Accompanying nystagmus, ataxia, neurological deficits (e.g., stroke symptoms). | MRI; lacks cyclovertical pattern. (+) neurologic signs vs. trochlear palsy. |
| Spasm of Near Reflex | Transient esotropia with miosis; resolves with cycloplegia. | Young patients; Esotropia with accommodative spasm. Very rare. |

### Age-Specific Manifestations

| Age Group | Manifestations | Functional Impact | Management Focus |
|---|---|---|---|
| Infants (0-4 months) | Congenital misalignment with asymmetrical tracking, lack of conjugate gaze; intermittent post-4 months signals accommodative or neurological issues. Congenital strabismus may remain asymptomatic due to early suppression or amblyopia. Detectable deviation, categorized as esotropia, exotropia, hypertropia, or hypotropia. | Asymptomatic due to suppression | Early screening; rule out neurologic cause; monitor fixation. |

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| Young Children (1-6 years) | Amblyopia (20/40-20/200 VA), variable postures, motor delays; early intervention prevents irreversible loss. Deviations may be constant or intermittent, with compensatory postures more pronounced. Age-related patterns show congenital strabismus asymptomatic due to suppression. | Motor delays, clumsiness, drawing difficulties | Glasses, MFBF therapy, patching, surgery; prevent amblyopia; assess school readiness. |
| School-Age/Adolescents (7-18 years) | Reading fatigue, intermittent diplopia, academic challenges; refractive factors dominant. Functional impacts like asthenopia during school tasks or near-work avoidance. | Academic decline, social withdrawal | Vision therapy, prism, ergonomic adjustments, visual hygiene. |
| Adults (>18 years) | Sudden diplopia, vertigo, cranial palsies; psychosocial distress common. Acquired cases correlate with trauma or systemic/neurologic diseases. | Occupational impacts, driving risk, reduced QoL | Urgent neuroimaging; vision therapy with prism or surgical considerations. |

**Pathophysiology**

The pathophysiology of strabismus is multifactorial, involving disruptions in the coordinated control of the six extraocular muscles and their neural pathways.

- **Innervational Deficits:**
    - *Cranial Nerve Imbalance:* Imbalances in cranial nerve supply (i.e., CN VI palsy causes unopposed medial rectus action, leading to esotropia). Anomalous innervation (i.e., co-contraction in Duane syndrome). Supranuclear lesions like progressive supranuclear palsy disrupt Sherrington's law (muscle of one eye and the antagonist of the same eye) and Hering's law (yoke/synergist muscles of both eyes).
    - *Cyclovertical Palsies:* Predominant in superior oblique paralysis linked to fourth cranial nerve dysfunction. Congenital forms feature large vertical fusion ranges; acquired cases (trauma, microvascular events) cause acute onset diagonal diplopia without large vertical fusion ranges.
- **Mechanical / Restrictive Factors:**
    - *Muscle Fibrosis/Tendon Restrictions:* Physical limitations from muscle fibrosis or tendon restrictions (i.e., Brown syndrome with tight superior oblique tendon). Forced duction testing reveals resistance.
    - *Orbital Floor Fractures:* Entrapment with positive forced duction, hypoesthesia, and enophthalmos. Mechanical restriction from trauma, affecting motility and alignment.
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- **Refractive / Sensory Components:**
    - *Uncorrected Hyperopia:* Hyperopia (>+3.00D) can trigger excessive accommodation, activating convergence via AC/A ratio (>6:1 in accommodative esotropia). Leads to inward deviation due to refractive/accommodation/convergence synkinesis.
    - *Sensory Strabismus:* Arises from unilateral visual loss (cataract, retinopathy), deviating the poor-seeing eye. The brain adapts by deviating the weaker eye to avoid confusion, leading to suppression or ARC.
- **Central / Neurogenic Elements:**
    - *CNS Microstructural Changes:* Developmental or acquired CNS disruption affecting eye movement control (decreased cerebellar vermis, superior colliculus connectivity).
    - *Genetic Mutations:* Mutations like ROBO3 in Duane syndrome or PHOX2A in congenital fibrosis of extraocular muscles provide a genetic basis for anomalous innervation or muscle development issues.
    - *Developmental Failures:* Failures in primitive reflex integration or proper visual experiences (visual stress, limited tummy time, uncorrected refractive error, lack of free play, etc.), leading to maladaptations. Early visual system maturation issues contribute to strabismus persistence.
    - *Proprioceptive Disruption:* Loss of feedback control in extraocular circuitry during early development. Leads to binocular vision loss due to impaired sensory-motor integration.

- **Adaptive Responses:**
  - *Suppression:* Chronic misalignment prompts cortical suppression to prevent diplopia, risking amblyopia. Common in children, reduces double vision but compromises visual acuity if untreated.
  - *Abnormal Retinal Correspondence (ARC):* Harmonious in 30-40% of cases, allowing pseudo-binocularity but reducing stereopsis. Brain adapts to misalignment, aligning retinal points abnormally for single vision.
  - *Pseudo-Overaction:* Secondary adaptation to underlying misalignment or restriction. Occurs in obliques (commonly inferior oblique) with large-angle exotropia ($>30^{\Delta}$), where the inferior oblique over-action compensates for the primary deviation. Unlike true IOOA, which arises from intrinsic muscle hyperfunction or neuromuscular imbalance (e.g., in infantile esotropia), pseudo-overaction is a compensatory response to correct or adapt to a misalignment or restriction. In large-angle exotropia, the inferior oblique may overact as a secondary adaptation to reduce horizontal divergence. By elevating the adducted eye, IOOA can subtly influence the horizontal alignment, attempting to bring the eyes closer to a fused position.

## Possible Associated Findings

| Finding | Details / Prevalence / Notes |
|---|---|
| Compensatory Head Postures | Tilts (fourth nerve palsy, 90%), Turns (Duane Type I, 95%), Chin elevations (Brown, 85%), Chin-down (A-pattern, 10%), Musculoskeletal issues (15% neck pain, 10% scoliosis, 5% torticollis, 5% strain, 5% stiffness). |
| Abnormal Eye Movements | Nystagmus (Pendular/rebound/gaze-evoked/end-point), Jerky saccades, Slow pursuits, (5% each). Blockage nystagmus: rare type of nystagmus as a compensatory mechanism in large-angle esotropia. Characterized by slow drift of eyes toward the nose followed by a quick corrective movement outward due to the "blockage" of the visual field by the nose, which limits the ability to maintain fixation and triggers the nystagmus. |
| Globe Retraction | Duane syndrome causing palpebral narrowing and globe retraction (2-3 mm, 85%) |
| Diplopia | 90% adult-onset, 30% >5y children, 5% young children (suppressed) |
| Ptosis | 70% third nerve palsy, variable myasthenia/thyroid, progressive myopathy |
| Nystagmus | 15-20% congenital strabismus, jerk nystagmus in INO. |
| Photophobia / Blepharospasm | 10% pediatric patients, alleviated by occlusion in bright light, 5% severe/tearing/reflexive blinking |
| Tearing/Squinting | 5% photophobia/blepharospasm/surface irritation<br>5% near work/accommodative |
| Eye Rubbing | 15% infants, 5% chronic/allergic/irritation/habitual |
| Asthenopia | 40% convergence insufficiency/exotropia (>30 min reading), 10% dizziness, 5% blurred vision/discomfort/near work difficulty |
| Fatigue | 40% exacerbates intermittency, 10% sleep disturbance, 5% drowsiness/concentration loss/screen fatigue |
| Headaches | 30% convergence insufficiency, 20% intermittent exotropia, 10% tension, 5% migraine/frontal/occipital |
| Visual Confusion | 10% overlapping images, 5% ghosting/jumping/binocular rivalry |
| Tripping/Clumsiness | 20% fall risk in children, 10% motor delay, 5% sports injuries/coordination/balance issues |
| Cosmetic Concerns | 40% adults, 40% pediatric consultations, 30% self-consciousness, 25% bullying,<br>20% surgery interest, 15% absenteeism, 10% peer rejection, 5% withdrawal/family embarrassment |

## Risk Factors

| Category | Description / Details | Action |
|---|---|---|
| Genetic | 30-50% heritability, 50-070% monozygotic twin concordance, 10-15% sibling risk, 5-10% parental risk. Strong familial component suggests a genetic basis. | Genetic counseling; family history review |
| Prenatal/Environmental | Maternal smoking (1.3-1.6x risk, 20% thyroid association), alcohol (>1 drink/day, 1.5x), diabetes (1.5x), prematurity (<32 weeks, 20%), low birth weight (<1500g, 18%), vitamin A deficiency (5%). Prenatal insults and nutritional deficits increase susceptibility. | Prenatal history; nutritional screening |
| Lifestyle | Prolonged near work (>4 hours/day, 15%), screen time (>6 hours/day, 10%), poor lighting (<200 lux, 5%), secondhand smoke (1.2x). Environmental stressors contribute to decompensation or onset. | Lifestyle modification advice; ergonomic adjustments |

**Understanding The Behavioral Model**

Strabismus, in its non-paralytic and non-traumatic forms, is conceptualized within behavioral optometry as a central nervous system disorder of binocular vision arising from disruption and decompensation of the sensory-motor fusion loop. This dynamic, self-regulating loop coordinates sensory inputs from corresponding retinal points with motor outputs to the extraocular muscles (via cranial nerves III, IV, and VI) to maintain precise alignment of the visual axes on a common point in space, ensuring single, clear, comfortable binocular vision across all distances and directions of gaze.

The deviation—whether constant or intermittent, esotropic or exotropic—does not stem from primary muscle weakness, but rather from a failure of the brain to sustain sensory fusion and motor control under physiological or environmental stress. At the heart of this process is sensory fusion, which occurs when images fall within Panum's fusional area. Even minute retinal disparities within this area activate binocular disparity detectors in visual cortex areas V1 and MST, triggering phasic fusional vergence. This fast vergence system is complemented by tonic vergence (the slow, adaptive baseline resting posture of the eyes, modifiable through prism adaptation), proximal vergence (driven by perceptual cues of nearness such as looming, size constancy, and overlap), and the accommodative convergence/accommodation (AC/A) response ratio, which couples blur-driven focusing to convergence (via cross-connections to the oculomotor nucleus). In normal development, the AC/A (typically 3-4$^{\Delta}$ per diopter of accommodation) is fine-tuned during infancy and early childhood through experience-dependent neuroplasticity, aligning convergence demand with the individual's interpupillary distance (IPD) and refractive profile.

- *Panum's Fusional Area:* the small 3D "bubble" of space around the point you're looking at where your brain can still fuse the two slightly different images from each eye into one clear picture, even though the eyes see the world from two different angles. Panum's area is the tolerance zone where those differences are small enough for the brain to merge them into one 3-D image (single vision + depth). At the fovea (center of gaze), it's tiny: about 15–30 arcminutes wide (that's ¼ to ½ a millimeter on the retina). Outside this zone --> double vision (diplopia) or suppression (brain ignores one eye). If eyes drift just a little (within Panum's), fusional vergence kicks in to pull them back. If drift is too big (outside Panum's), fusion fails --> eyes stay misaligned --> strabismus. Think of it like a rubber band: Panum's area is how much "stretch" the brain allows before the eyes "snap" out of alignment.
- *Sensory Fusion:* Sensory fusion is your brain combining the two slightly different pictures from your left and right eyes into one single, 3-D image so you see one clear world, not two overlapping ones. Each eye sees the world from a different angle (like two cameras side by side). The brain matches up the two images using corresponding points on each retina. When the images land close enough (inside Panum's fusional area), the brain fuses them and you see one object with depth (stereopsis). This happens automatically in the visual cortex (V1 and beyond). Sensory fusion fails when eyes drift outside Panum's area. If the brain can't fuse, it suppresses one eye to avoid double vision. Over time, no fusion = no binocular depth, so strabismus becomes permanent. Sensory fusion is the brain's "glue" that holds the two eye pictures together. No glue --> eyes drift apart --> strabismus.
- *Motor Fusion:* Motor fusion precedes sensory fusion. Motor fusion uses the extraocular muscles to physically align both eyes onto the target of regard to maintain binocular fixation - the eyes

move to maintain alignment on the same target at the same time so that sensory fusion in the brain can then combine the two retinal images into a single, complete, unified, picture.

- *Medial Superior Temporal (MST) area:* a region in the visual cortex (part of the dorsal stream) specialized for motion processing and binocular disparity detection—critical for driving fusional vergence to keep the eyes aligned on moving or depth-varying targets.
- *Phasic Fusional Vergence:* the brain's automatic reflex that instantly snaps the eyes back into perfect alignment the moment they start to drift apart. When you're looking at something, if the eyes slip even a tiny bit, the two images no longer line up perfectly on the retinas; this mismatch is called retinal disparity. The brain picks this up right away in special motion and depth areas of the visual cortex (V1 and MST). Within less than a fifth of a second, it sends a sharp signal through the midbrain and brainstem to the eye muscles, and the eyes lock back onto the same spot. Fusion is restored, and you keep seeing one clear image. This "phasic" system is the fast-acting, short-burst part of vergence—like a reflex kick. It's completely driven by the sensory mismatch between the two eyes and depends on intact sensory fusion to work. It's different from tonic vergence, which is the slow, steady resting position of the eyes. When phasic fusional vergence is weak, slow, or missing—because of fatigue, poor development, stress, or broken fusion—the eyes can't correct small drifts. Those drifts grow. First, the misalignment is intermittent (only when tired or focused up close). Then, if the system keeps failing, it becomes constant, and that's strabismus. Phasic fusional vergence is like your eyes' built-in auto-correct: a super-fast teamwork reflex that keeps vision single and sharp thousands of times a day. If it breaks down, the eyes lose their lock and drift into strabismus.

The behavioral model, deeply rooted in A.M. Skeffington's pioneering four circles model (established through the OEPF in 1928), redefines vision not as a passive optical process but as an emergent, anti-stress, self-organizing skill that integrates localization (where in space), identification (what the object is), centering (how to align and sustain attention), and sustained performance (with what efficiency and endurance). Strabismus emerges as a learned, compensatory maladaptation when chronic visual stress—from such conditions as uncorrected hyperopia, anisometropia, prolonged near-point demand, developmental immaturity, or systemic fatigue—exceeds the neuroplastic adaptive capacity of the accommodative-vergence synergy. This stress initiates a predictable hierarchy of decompensation: high latent phoria --> intermittent tropia under fatigue or inattention --> constant tropia with deep suppression and anomalous retinal correspondence. The primary stressor is nearly always a mismatch between accommodative demand and convergence supply, clinically quantified as an abnormal response AC/A ratio, inadequate fusional vergence reserves, poor vergence adaptability, or high accommodative lag. Over time, phasic vergence fatigues, tonic vergence drifts to a new, maladaptive resting position, and central suppression (mediated by cortical inhibition in V1 and extrastriate areas) replaces active sensory fusion to eliminate diplopia or confusion—effectively sacrificing binocularity for monocular clarity and comfort. Simply stated: over repetitive, stressful time, phasic (fast) vergence fatigues, tonic (slow) vergence drifts to a new resting position, and central suppression replaces sensory fusion—locking the deviation in place. Again, this progression is not random, but follows a predictable hierarchy of decompensation: high latent phoria --> intermittent tropia under fatigue --> constant tropia with deep suppression and anomalous correspondence.

The theoretical foundation was laid by early orthoptic pioneers—Mary Maddox (who emphasized fusional amplitudes as diagnostic and therapeutic pillars), Claud Alley Worth and Walter B. Lancaster (who introduced the Worth amblyoscope to grade normal (NRC), anomalous (ARC), and suppression states), Hermann Burian (who formalized ductions, versions, vergence dynamics, and AC/A gradient measurement), and Gunter K. von Noorden (who established the four-grade binocularity scale and showed infantile esotropia reflects absent sensory fusion from birth). These were integrated into Skeffington's systems framework by G.N. Getman, Harry L. Parkinson, and E.B. Alexander, who developed the OEP Clinical Curriculum. Robert Kraskin advanced vergence as a learned, neuroplastic skill through slow vergence training (vectograms, aperture rule), while Martin Birnbaum introduced the stress model and Birnbaum AC/A classification (low, normal, high), predicting lens-responsive esotropia. Sidney Groffman and Irwin B. Suchoff linked Piagetian spatial cognition and Hebbian learning to binocular development, showing infantile esotropia as failed binocular engram formation (the hardwired neural network that processes stereopsis in the brain and that develops between 0 and 8 months) due to insufficient simultaneous foveal stimulation. Mitchell Scheiman, Bruce Wick, Susan Cotter, and the PEDIG group provided evidence-based validation via ME-PEDS, BPEDS, and CITT-ART studies, confirming hyperopia ≥+3.50 D (odds ratio 8.1), anisometropia ≥1.50 D (OR 6.3), and family history (OR 3.7) as risk factors for strabismus. Leonard Press introduced the vergence adaptation-fatigue model of intermittent exotropia (phoria --> suppression --> drift to dissociated position, typically 8-12$^{\Delta}$ exophoria at near). Robert Sanet's SVI demonstrated 40-60% phasic vergence gain increase in 12 sessions. Lawrence Tychsen's primate models confirmed V1 binocular neuron maldevelopment and LGN crossed projections in early-onset strabismus.

The four-pillar model of binocular stability—sensory input quality, central fusion processing, vergence tone adaptation, and accommodative-vergence synergy—explains specific forms:

- Infantile esotropia (~40-60$^{\Delta}$, crossed fixation, absent stereopsis): primary calibration failure during critical period.
- Accommodative esotropia: high response AC/A (>6:1) overdrives convergence in hyperopia; initially partially accommodative, becomes non-accommodative as tonic vergence adapts inward.
- Intermittent exotropia (most common in older children): progressive vergence fatigue under near demand --> phoria --> divergence excess --> basic exotropia with suppression deepening
- Convergence insufficiency exotropia: chronic near-stress depletion of phasic convergence gain.
- Basic exotropia: congenital high exo tonic posture exceeding fusional amplitude

The developmental timeline further refines the theory. During the critical period for binocular vision (birth to ~8 years), simultaneous foveal stimulation drives Hebbian wiring of binocular cortical neurons in V1 and extrastriate areas. Infantile esotropia represents a primary calibration failure: without early sensory fusion, the vergence system never learns a stable null point, defaulting to a large-angle, constant esotropia (~40-60$^{\Delta}$) with cross fixation and absent stereopsis.

In contrast, preschool- or school-age onset forms (accommodative esotropia, intermittent exotropia) begin as marginally compensated high phorias. Uncorrected hyperopia (+3.00 D or greater) forces excess accommodation, which—via a high response AC/A (>6:1)—pulls the eyes inward; initially the deviation is partially accommodative (resolves with plus lenses), but if untreated, tonic vergence adapts inward, and the esotropia becomes non-accommodative.

Intermittent exotropia, the most common form in older children, follows vergence fatigue: prolonged near work in emmetropes or early myopes depleted fusional convergence reserves; dynamic retinoscopy reveals accommodative lag >1.00 D, NPC break >10 cm, and reduced vergence facility. The eyes drift outward during inattention, illness, or distance gaze, progressing from phoria --> divergence excess --> basic exotropia as suppression deepens and tonic divergence dominates.

Convergence insufficiency exotropia is the endpoint of chronic near-point stress without adequate phasic convergence gain. A comprehensive visual performance analysis identifies these pre-strabismic stress signatures years before constant deviation, enabling preventive vision therapy to recalibrate AC/A, expand fusional amplitudes, and restore adaptive reserve through neuroplastic retraining.

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Petrosyan TS. An approach to strabismus diagnosis (part 1). Optom Vis Perf 2025;13(4):280-94.