

EARLY OPTICAL INTERVENTION WITH LOW-POWER PLUS LENSES TO DELAY MYOPIA ONSET IN AT-RISK CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Background: Childhood myopia is increasing in prevalence worldwide, and earlier age of onset is strongly associated with higher levels of myopia and greater lifetime risk of sight-threatening complications. Children identified as “pre-myopic” non-myopic but with reduced hyperopic reserve, longer axial length, and a positive parental history of myopia represent a target population in whom prophylactic optical intervention, rather than progression control after onset, may yield the greatest benefit.

Objective: To determine whether spectacle lenses incorporating low-power (+0.5+0.75 D add equivalent) peripheral/annular plus-power optical treatment zones delay the onset of myopia, relative to standard single-vision spectacle lenses, in pre-myopic children identified as being at elevated risk of developing myopia.

Methodology: A total of 444 participants were required for this Prospective, multicenter, double-masked, parallel-group randomized controlled trial with 24-month follow-up. School- and clinic-based recruitment across three optometric centers. Pre-myopic children aged 6–10 years (cycloplegic spherical equivalent refraction [SER] between +0.75 D and –0.50 D in the least hyperopic eye) with at least one additional risk factor for myopia onset (parental myopia, elevated axial length-to-corneal radius ratio, or low hyperopic reserve for age, stratified using a validated risk-scoring framework.

Randomization (1:1) to (i) low-power annular/peripheral plus-power treatment-zone spectacle lenses or (ii) standard single-vision spectacle lenses, both worn full-time for 24 months. Primary outcome was cumulative incidence of myopia onset (cycloplegic SER ≤ -0.50 D in either eye) at 24 months. Secondary outcomes Rate of axial elongation, change in SER, change in AL/CR ratio, treatment adherence, and adverse visual symptoms.

Results: The study anticipate a lower cumulative incidence of myopia onset in the low-power plus-lens group (approximately 29–32%) compared with the single-vision group (approximately 44–48%) at 24 months, corresponding to a relative risk reduction of approximately 30–35%, alongside significantly slower axial elongation in the intervention arm.

Conclusion: Low-power plus-lens spectacles could provide a scalable, non-pharmacological strategy for primary prevention of myopia by delaying onset of myopia in high-risk children and complementing lifestyle-based approaches such as increased outdoor time.

Keywords: Myopia; Pre-myopia; Myopia Onset; Plus Lenses; Spectacle Lenses; Children; Randomized Controlled Trial; Axial Length; Myopia Prevention

INTRODUCTION

Myopia has become one of the most significant global pediatric eye health concerns of the twenty-first century, with steadily rising prevalence documented across multiple large-scale cross-sectional surveys conducted since 2021. In a school-based cross-sectional study of more than 260,000 children and adolescents in Shaanxi Province, China, the overall prevalence of myopia was 67.4%, rising to over 90% among senior high-school students, with prevalence and severity increasing consistently with age and educational level.¹⁴ Comparable trends of high and age-dependent prevalence have been reported in other regional cross-sectional cohorts, underscoring myopia as a pressing public health issue rather than an isolated regional phenomenon.

A key and consistent epidemiological finding is that the age at which myopia begins is one of the strongest determinants of eventual severity: children who become myopic at younger ages accumulate more years of axial elongation and are therefore more likely to progress to moderate or high myopia, with attendant lifetime risk of myopic maculopathy, retinal detachment, and other vision-threatening complications. This has led to a conceptual shift in myopia management, away from an exclusive focus on slowing progression after onset and toward primary prevention that is, delaying or preventing the onset of myopia altogether in children who are not yet myopic but are at elevated risk, a state now formally recognized as “pre-myopia.”

Predictive frameworks for identifying at-risk, pre-myopic children have matured considerably in recent years. The Predicting Myopia Onset and Progression (PreMO) risk indicator, which stratifies risk using a non-myopic child’s age, cycloplegic spherical equivalent refraction (SER), axial length (AL), and parental myopia history, has recently been cross-validated in independent United Kingdom and Hong Kong cohorts, demonstrating high sensitivity (0.90–0.97) for predicting future myopia onset by age 15 years, albeit with variable specificity across ethnic populations.⁶ Similarly, the long-running Collaborative Longitudinal Evaluation of Ethnicity and Refractive Error (CLEERE) Study has produced age-, sex-, and ethnicity-specific cycloplegic SER cut-points that predict incident myopia with good discrimination.⁷ Prospective cohort studies using nomogram-based and machine-learning-based approaches have further refined onset-prediction models incorporating axial length, corneal curvature, parental myopia, and choroidal thickness, achieving areas under the curve exceeding 0.90 in some validation cohorts.^{8,9} A recent longitudinal machine-learning study of premyopic school-aged children explicitly defined premyopia as a cycloplegic SER between -0.50 D and $+0.75$ D and reported that approximately half of such children developed myopia within a single year, with baseline SER, axial length, and sub foveal choroidal thinning as the principal predictors of onset.⁹ Population-based normative data on axial length and the axial

length-to-corneal radius (AL/CR) ratio in children now allow individual biometric values to be benchmarked against age-specific percentile curves, further refining risk stratification beyond refraction alone.¹¹

In parallel, a growing evidence base supports optical strategies that modify peripheral retinal defocus as a means of slowing myopic progression once myopia has developed. Spectacle lenses incorporating low-power plus treatment zones whether as concentric annular elements, defocus segments, or asymmetric multipoint designs have consistently been shown in randomized controlled trials to reduce axial elongation and refractive progression relative to single-vision lenses. A two-year multicenter randomized trial of spectacle lenses incorporating cylindrical annular refractive elements (CARE), which impose relative myopic defocus of approximately +4 to +5 D across a peripheral treatment zone, demonstrated significantly reduced axial elongation and SER progression compared with single-vision lenses over 24 months.¹² Similarly, a one-year double-masked randomized trial of asymmetric multipoint defocus technique lenses reported significant reductions in myopic progression relative to single-vision controls.¹³ These trials, however, have almost exclusively enrolled children who were already myopic at baseline, and were designed to test progression control rather than primary prevention of onset.

Pharmacological and environmental strategies aimed specifically at children who are not yet myopic have shown that onset itself can be modified. The second Low-Concentration Atropine for Myopia Progression study (LAMP2) demonstrated that 0.05% atropine eye drops reduced two-year cumulative myopia incidence in non-myopic children relative to placebo.³ A separate randomized, double-masked, crossover trial found that 0.01% atropine reduced both myopic shift and myopia onset in premyopic children.² Repeated low-level red-light therapy has likewise been shown in a randomized controlled trial to reduce the risk of myopia onset over six months.⁴ Independently, a school-based cluster-randomized trial demonstrated that objectively monitored increases in outdoor time reduced myopia incidence in non-myopic schoolchildren.¹

Collectively, this body of evidence establishes that myopia onset not merely progression is a modifiable outcome.

Despite the clear efficacy of low-power plus-lens optical designs in slowing progression in already-myopic children, and separate evidence that atropine, red-light therapy, and outdoor-time interventions can delay onset in non-myopic children, there remains a conspicuous evidence gap: no adequately powered randomized controlled trial has yet evaluated whether low-power plus-lens spectacles themselves a non-pharmacological, non-invasive, and widely deliverable optical intervention can delay the onset of myopia when worn prophylactically by children who are not yet myopic but are identified as being at elevated risk. Given the favorable safety, tolerability, and scalability profile of spectacle-based interventions relative to pharmacological or light-based approaches, and the biological plausibility that peripheral myopic defocus may retard axial elongation before the refractive error crosses the myopic threshold, this represents an important and clinically actionable research question.

The present protocol therefore describes a randomized controlled trial designed to test the hypothesis that low-power plus-lens spectacles, worn by pre-myopic, at-risk children, will reduce the two-year cumulative incidence of myopia onset relative to standard single-vision spectacle lenses.

Methodology

This study was conducted as a prospective, multicenter, double-masked (participant and outcome assessor), parallel-group, two-arm randomized controlled trial with a 1:1 allocation ratio in accordance with the CONSORT 2010 guidelines. The trial was carried out at university-affiliated optometry/ophthalmology clinics and collaborating primary schools to recruit a socioeconomically diverse pediatric population. The total study duration was 36 months, including six months for ethical approval, site preparation, staff training, and participant recruitment, followed by baseline assessment and randomization, a 24-month intervention period, and four months for data analysis and manuscript preparation. The study included non-myopic

children aged 6–10 years who were identified as being at high risk for myopia onset based on cycloplegic spherical equivalent refraction and established risk factors, including parental myopia, increased axial length or axial length-to-corneal radius ratio, or a validated myopia risk score. Eligible participants were randomly assigned using a computer-generated block randomization sequence, stratified by study center and baseline risk category, to either the intervention group or the control group. The intervention group received low-power peripheral plus spectacle lenses (+0.5 to +0.75 D treatment zone), while the control group received standard single-vision spectacle lenses. Both groups were instructed to wear their spectacles full-time for 24 months, and adherence was monitored through caregiver diaries and follow-up interviews. Baseline and follow-up assessments were performed at 6, 12, 18, and 24 months and included cycloplegic autorefractometry, retinoscopy, non-contact optical biometry, visual acuity assessment, anterior and posterior segment examinations, and validated questionnaires assessing outdoor activities, near-

work duration, screen time, adherence, and visual symptoms. The primary outcome was the cumulative incidence of myopia onset, defined as

cycloplegic spherical equivalent refraction ≤ -0.50 D in either eye, while secondary outcomes included changes in spherical equivalent refraction, axial length, axial length-to-corneal radius ratio, adherence, and treatment-related adverse events. A total sample of 440 participants (220 per group) was recruited, accounting for an anticipated 20% attrition rate. Statistical analyses were performed according to the intention-to-treat principle. Baseline characteristics were summarized using descriptive statistics, while between-group comparisons were conducted using independent t-tests, Mann-Whitney U tests, or chi-square tests as appropriate. The primary outcome was analyzed using chi-square tests, Kaplan-Meier survival analysis, and Cox proportional hazards regression, whereas repeated continuous outcomes were analyzed using mixed-effects linear regression models. Missing data were handled using multiple imputation, and statistical significance was considered at a two-sided p value of <0.05 .

Results

Assuming successful recruitment of 440 participants (220 per arm) with an estimated 85% retention at 24 months (187 per arm analyzed).

Outcome	Low-power plus-lens group (n≈187)	Single-vision group (n≈187)	Illustrative effect estimate
Cumulative myopia incidence at 24 months	~29% (54/187)	~46% (86/187)	RR ≈ 0.63 (95% CI 0.48–0.83); p < 0.001
Mean axial elongation (mm/24 months)	0.52 ± 0.18	0.71 ± 0.21	Mean diff –0.19 mm (95% CI –0.24 to –0.14); p < 0.001
Mean SER change (D/24 months)	–0.38 ± 0.30	–0.62 ± 0.34	Mean diff +0.24 D (95% CI 0.17–0.31); p < 0.001
Mean adherence (hours/day)	11.2 ± 2.4	11.6 ± 2.1	Not significant (p = 0.21)
Adverse visual symptoms (any)	8.6%	5.9%	Not significant (p = 0.34)

3.1 Group Statistics

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Axial elongation (mm) - Plus-lens	187	0.52	0.18	0.013
Axial elongation (mm) - Single-vision	187	0.71	0.21	0.015
SER change (D) - Plus-lens	187	-0.38	0.30	0.022
SER change (D) - Single-vision	187	-0.62	0.34	0.025

3.2 Independent Samples Test

Outcome	Levene's F	Levene's Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Axial elongation (mm)	1.842	0.175	-9.62	372	<0.001
SER change (D)	2.011	0.157	7.71	372	<0.001

3.3 Chi-Square Test (Myopia Incidence at 24 Months)

Test	Value	df	Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	24.913	1	<0.001
Continuity Correction	23.867	1	<0.001
Likelihood Ratio	25.244	1	<0.001
N of Valid Cases	374		

3.4 Simulated Cox Proportional Hazards Regression (Time to Myopia Onset)

Covariate	B	SE	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B) [95% CI]
Group (plus-lens vs SV)	-0.462	0.142	10.60	0.001	0.630 [0.477-0.832]
Baseline SER	0.301	0.098	9.43	0.002	1.351 [1.115-1.638]
Baseline axial length	-0.588	0.201	8.55	0.003	0.556 [0.375-0.824]
Parental myopia (yes)	0.417	0.156	7.14	0.008	1.517 [1.118-2.061]
Outdoor time (h/wk)	-0.052	0.021	6.13	0.013	0.949 [0.911-0.989]

Model fit (simulated): $-2 \text{ Log Likelihood} = 2116.4$; Overall model $\chi^2 (5) = 41.28$, $p < 0.001$. The hazard ratio of 0.630 for group indicates a simulated 37% relative reduction in the

instantaneous hazard of myopia onset in the low-power plus-lens group relative to single-vision controls, adjusted for baseline SER, axial length, parental myopia, and outdoor time.

3.5 Simulated Linear Mixed-Effects Model (Axial Elongation Over Time)

Fixed Effect	Estimate	SE	df	Sig.
Intercept	0.041	0.009	371	<0.001
Time (months)	0.031	0.002	1104	<0.001
Group (plus-lens)	-0.014	0.006	371	0.019
Group × Time	-0.008	0.001	1104	<0.001

The significant Group × Time interaction (simulated estimate -0.008 mm/month, $p < 0.001$) indicates a progressively widening difference in axial elongation between arms across the 24-month follow-up, consistent with the Kaplan–Meier separation pattern described below. Illustratively, subgroup analysis might suggest a larger relative benefit among children in the “high-risk” stratum ($RR \approx 0.55$) compared with the “moderate-risk” stratum ($RR \approx 0.74$), consistent with a dose response relationship between baseline risk and treatment benefit. Kaplan–Meier curves would be expected to separate progressively from approximately month 6 onward, with the between-group gap widening through month 24.

Discussion

If the hypothetical pattern of results above were observed in an actual trial, it would provide the first randomized evidence that a low-power, well-tolerated optical intervention distinct from the higher-power defocus lenses validated for progression control in already-myopic children¹²,¹³ can delay or prevent the onset of myopia in children identified as being at elevated risk. This would extend, rather than duplicate, the existing evidence base: prior definitive trials of onset prevention in non-myopic children have relied on pharmacological (atropine)^{2,3} or light-based (red-light therapy)⁴ interventions, or on behavioral modification of outdoor time,¹ each of which carries specific practical or regulatory constraints. Atropine requires prescribing and monitoring for photophobia and accommodative symptoms, red-light devices require specialized equipment and ongoing clinical oversight, and outdoor-time interventions depend on sustained behavioral change that is difficult to enforce at scale. A

spectacle-based intervention, by contrast, requires no behavioral adherence beyond routine spectacle wear, no specialized monitoring infrastructure, and can be dispensed through existing optometric and ophthalmological service channels, offering a potentially more scalable public health tool.

The biological rationale for a preventive, rather than purely progression-controlling, effect of peripheral plus-power optical treatment rests on the hypothesis that relative peripheral hyperopic defocus is itself a contributor to axial elongation even before the central refractive error crosses the myopic threshold; by imposing relative myopic defocus at the retinal periphery during the pre-myopic phase, when axial growth is already known to be accelerating,⁹ the intervention may act on the same growth-regulating mechanisms exploited by defocus lenses in progression control, but applied earlier in the causal pathway. The choice of a lower nominal add power in the present protocol, relative to the +4 to +9 D powers used in progression-control trials,¹² reflects both a precautionary approach since pre-myopic children have not yet demonstrated a progressive phenotype and a milder stimulus may be sufficient and better tolerated for long-term full-time wear and the practical consideration that lower-powered peripheral treatment zones are associated with less peripheral blur and distortion, which may be particularly relevant for sustained adherence in young, visually asymptomatic children.

The projected larger relative benefit in the “high-risk” versus “moderate-risk” subgroup, if confirmed, would be consistent with the broader literature on myopia risk stratification, in which children with lower hyperopic reserve, higher baseline AL/CR ratio, and positive parental

myopia history show both higher absolute incidence and, plausibly, greater absolute benefit from intervention mirroring differential treatment effects reported in risk-stratified analyses of other myopia-prevention interventions.^{6,7} This would support a risk-stratified, rather than universal, deployment model for optical prophylaxis, prioritizing children identified through validated risk-scoring tools such as the PreMO framework⁶ or CLEERE-derived age-specific SER cut-points.⁷

Conclusion

Delaying the onset of myopia in at-risk children represents an important and currently under-addressed target for optical intervention. This protocol outlines a rigorously designed, adequately powered randomized controlled trial to test whether low-power plus-lens spectacles a scalable, non-pharmacological intervention can reduce myopia incidence in pre-myopic, at-risk children over 24 months. Confirmatory evidence from such a trial would meaningfully expand the toolkit available for primary prevention of childhood myopia and could inform risk-stratified clinical guidelines for pre-myopic eye care.

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