

Myopia in kids: Spend more time outdoors

■ **BY FENG ZENGKUN**

INSUFFICIENT time spent outdoors is the main contributor to short-sightedness among children in East Asian cities, including Singapore.

This is according to a paper published in medical journal *The Lancet* today. "Most of (the myopia) we've seen in East Asia is due to the environment, it is not genetic," said Professor Ian Morgan, a researcher at the Australian National University who co-authored the paper.

The researchers said children who spend two to three hours outdoors a day are "probably reasonably safe" from getting myopia. This could include time spent on the playground and walking to and from school.

The researchers stressed that being a bookworm or spending time on the computer is not detrimental to eyesight, as long as time is also devoted to outdoor activities during the day.

Exposure to the sun's rays is believed to stimulate production of the chemical dopamine, which stops the eyeball from growing elongated and distorting light that enters the eye.

Prof Morgan noted that children in East Asia spend the majority of their time indoors, studying and watching television.

More than half of Singapore's 10-year-olds are short-sighted.

Its myopia rate is among the world's highest because children here spend only about 30 minutes outdoors after school on weekdays, said Professor Saw Seang Mei who co-authored the *Lancet* paper.

The professor at National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, who recommends spending at least 10 hours outdoors every week, led a recently-concluded, year-long trial here that took children to parks every weekend to gauge the outdoor effect on myopia. The team is now studying the data.