

Vision



The human body has a number of senses that help identify the environment. People utilize their senses of sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste. While all are important in our daily life, perhaps one of the most important senses is our vision. However, it is very important that we do everything to protect our eyes and the health of our eyes, particularly as we get older. To learn more about potential vision problems we offer the information below.

Vision and Eye Problems in Aging Adults

There are several eye problems that are more common among people as they age, although they can affect anyone at any age. They include:

- **Presbyopia.** This is the loss of the ability to clearly see close objects or small print. It is a normal process that happens slowly over a lifetime, but you may not notice any change until after age 40. Presbyopia is often corrected with reading glasses.
- **Floater.** These are tiny spots or specks that float across the field of vision. Most people notice them in well-lit rooms or outdoors on a bright day. Floaters often are normal, but can sometimes indicate a more serious eye problem, such as retinal detachment, especially if they are accompanied by light flashes.
- **Dry eyes.** This happens when tear glands cannot make enough tears or produce poor quality tears. Dry eyes can be uncomfortable, causing itching, burning, or rarely some loss of vision. Your eye doctor may suggest using a humidifier in your home or special eye drops that simulate real tears. Tear duct plugs or surgery may be needed in more serious cases of dry eyes.
- **Tearing.** Having too many tears can come from being sensitive to light, wind, or temperature changes. Protecting your eyes by shielding them or wearing sunglasses can sometimes solve the problem. Tearing may also mean that you have a more serious problem, such as an eye infection or a blocked tear duct.
- **Cataracts.** Cataracts are cloudy areas that cover part of or the entire lens. Since a healthy eye lens is clear like a camera lens, light has no problem passing through the lens to the back of the eye to the retina where images are processed. When a cataract is present, the light cannot get through the lens as easily and, as a result, vision can be impaired.
- **Glaucoma.** This condition develops when there is too much fluid pressure inside the eye. It occurs when the normal flow of the watery fluid between the cornea and the lens of the eye is blocked. If not treated early, this can lead to permanent vision loss and blindness. Glaucoma is less commonly caused by other factors such as injury to the eye, severe eye infection, blockage of blood vessels, or inflammatory disorders of the eye.
- **Retinal disorders.** The retina is a thin lining on the back of the eye made up of cells that collect visual images and pass them on to the brain. Retinal disorders interrupt this transfer of images. They include age-related macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, retinal vessel occlusions, and retinal detachment.
- **Conjunctivitis.** This is a condition in which the tissue that lines the eyelids and covers the eyeball becomes inflamed. It is sometimes called “pink eye.” It can cause redness, itching, burning, tearing or a feeling of something in the eye. Conjunctivitis occurs in people of all ages and can be caused by infection, exposure to chemicals and irritants, or allergies.
- **Corneal diseases.** The cornea is the clear, dome-shaped “window” at the front of the eye. It helps to focus light that enters the eye. Disease, infection, injury, and exposure to toxic agents can damage the cornea causing pain, redness, watery eyes, reduced vision, or a halo effect.
- **Eyelid problems.** The eyelids protect the eye, distribute tears, and limit the amount of light entering the eye. Pain, itching, tearing, and sensitivity to light are common symptoms of eyelid problems. Other problems may include drooping eyelids, blinking spasms, or inflamed outer edges of the eyelids near the eyelashes.
- **Temporal arteritis.** This condition causes the arteries in the temple area of the forehead to swell. It can begin with a severe headache, pain when chewing, and tenderness in the temple area. It may be followed in a few weeks by sudden vision loss in one eye. Other symptoms can include shaking, weight loss, and low-grade fever.

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Dealing With Vision Loss in Seniors

Just about everyone experiences some degree of vision loss as we age. But severe vision loss is a significant problem affecting millions of elderly Americans. In fact, according to the most recent Longitudinal Prevalence of Major Eye Diseases research, almost 7 million Americans over the age of 65 have severe visual impairment. Perhaps more stunning is that these same experts predict that given the current growth in the aging population that number is likely to double by 2030. "By 2030, there may be more than 14 million Americans over the age of 65 suffering severe visual impairment." – Prevent Blindness, Study.

Vision loss affects the quality of life of aging adults in many ways, not the least of which is loss of the ability to enjoy everyday activities such as reading the newspaper or watching TV or movies. Mobility and freedom are impacted when seniors suffering vision loss can no longer drive. And according to the Centers for Disease Control, a visually impaired senior is at increased risk for falls and fractures, and more likely to require hospitalization and long-term care than those with good vision. Visually impaired seniors are at greater risk for depression, and more likely to make errors in doses of medication.

Reasons for age related eye disease

According to the National Eye Institute, there are four major conditions that account for age-related eye diseases in the elderly. They are:

- Glaucoma – leads to peripheral vision loss
- Macular degeneration – leads to center vision loss
- Diabetic retinopathy – causes "spotty" vision
- Cataracts – causes blurred or "filmy" vision

A senior with severe vision loss may have any one or more of

these conditions. According to the institute, age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is the number one cause of blindness among senior citizens.

Treatments for vision loss

For the elderly person experiencing vision loss, it is important that he or she sees a doctor immediately to determine its source. Many of the causes of severe vision loss in the elderly are now treatable. Surgical treatments and eye drops are available that can reduce the pressure in the eye caused by glaucoma. Today, cataracts can often be completely reversed with surgery, and there are new injectable drug therapies that have shown remarkable results in reversing the effects of AMD.

For those with mild to severe vision loss, there are many assistive devices that can restore a meaningful quality of life. Such devices include:

- Magnifiers and "readers"
- Books on tape and other audio programs
- Software that make computers easier to use for the visually impaired

In addition to the use of these assistive devices, the American Foundation for the Blind recommends that all seniors experiencing any degree of vision loss:

- Install task lights in cabinets, under stoves and other dark areas
- Only read or work in a well-lighted room
- Arrange furniture with clear pathways
- Install grab bars in bathrooms
- Keep lawns and gardens free from clutter, and pathways very well lit at night

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