



Frequently asked questions about eye health

What are the most common eye problems?

The majority of eye related problems occur in the older adult population. The most common eye related problems in our community are cataracts, glaucoma, age related macular degeneration (AMD) and problems related to diabetes.

The most common reason for people to seek advice about their eyes is for spectacles or contact lenses. This can be for a number of problems, including short-sightedness (blurred vision in the distance), farsightedness (blurred vision more for near) or presbyopia, where the ability to focus on close objects is slowly lost over the age of 40, requiring reading glasses.

What is a cataract?

Cataracts are a gradual clouding of the lens in the eye resulting in blurring of vision. It can also result in glare, and difficulties with night vision. Early cataracts can sometimes be compensated for with glasses. The main treatment for cataracts is surgery, with removal of the cataract and replacement of the natural lens with an artificial lens.

What is glaucoma?

Glaucoma is a condition where the optic nerve is damaged, first resulting in the loss of peripheral or side vision. It is often, but not always, associated with an elevated pressure in the eyes. The biggest problem with glaucoma is that the majority of people who have it have no symptoms at all until a late stage of the disease when blindness can result. This is because it is difficult to notice a slow deterioration in peripheral vision.

Because the disease is silent, everyone should have their eyes checked for glaucoma after the age of 40.

The most important risk factors for developing glaucoma are increasing age and a family history of glaucoma.

Glaucoma can be controlled, not cured, with the use of drops, laser and surgery. We aim to control glaucoma to prevent further loss of vision. Any loss of vision, which has already occurred, is not reversible.

What is Age Related Macular Degeneration (AMD)?

AMD is a problem with part of the retina, which works like the film in a camera. The part of the retina that gives us the sharpest vision for example, for reading, is called the macula. The macula can deteriorate with age, resulting in loss of the sharp vision we need for reading and driving. Peripheral, or side vision is not affected by AMD. We know that people who smoke cigarettes are five times more likely to develop AMD. AMD can sometimes be treated by laser to try and prevent further loss of vision.

What effect can Diabetes have on eyesight?

Diabetes can affect the eyes in a number of ways. The two most common are by damaging the retina, and by making cataracts occur more quickly. It is very important to keep diabetes well controlled to slow or prevent these complications. The retinal damage can sometimes be

treated with laser or surgery to try and prevent vision being lost. However, prevention is better than cure.

What can people do to maintain good eye health?

Many diseases can affect the eyes, and it is important to treat these problems to prevent eye problems. Diabetes and high blood pressure are examples of common diseases that can affect the eyes and should be controlled in conjunction with your local doctor or physician.

There is increasing evidence of the role of antioxidants in the prevention of eye disease, so it is sensible to eat a balanced diet high in fruit and vegetables.

We should remember to wear appropriate protective eyewear whenever we are doing something potentially damaging to the eyes, such as using power tools. It is very common for someone to say "I was just doing something for one minute, I didn't think I needed to wear my safety glasses", and end up with an eye injury. Ocky straps in particular are very dangerous and should be avoided. We need to be careful to avoid chemical splashes to the eyes, especially alkali chemicals such as in cleaning solutions and lime, as these can lead to serious burns.

We should avoid excessive exposure to ultraviolet light by wearing a hat and sunglasses. Excessive UV light can lead to pterygium (an abnormal growth of the skin of the eye, the conjunctiva), early onset of cataract and other eye problems.

When should people have their eyes checked?

The need for regular eye checks varies from person to person. Adults should consider having an eye check every two years after the age of 35. Children normally have their vision checked several times at school.

There are circumstances when we should have more frequent eye checks. If there is a family history of an eye related problem, such as glaucoma, we should seek medical advice about how often we need to be checked. If we have noticed a specific problem, such as pain, worsening vision or a child that does not appear to see well, we need to seek attention as soon as possible. Diabetics need to have at least second yearly eye checks.

What eye conditions commonly affect children?

Children suffer eye problems less frequently than adults, but they certainly do occur. The more common problems in children include squint, where the eyes are turned, and amblyopia or 'lazy eye'. In this condition the eye looks normal but does not see well because the eyes develop in competition with one another, and the other eye is 'stronger'. These conditions can require glasses, patching or covering of the stronger eye to strengthen the weaker eye, and sometimes surgery to straighten the eyes. Other common conditions in children include eye infections and watery eyes from blockages in the tear drainage system.

What is the difference between an ophthalmologist and an optometrist?

Optometrists and ophthalmologists both work to provide eye care and whilst there is some overlap in their roles, the emphasis is different.

Optometrists undertake four years of university study to qualify, and are mainly involved in prescribing glasses and contact lenses. They are also involved in the diagnosis and treatment of some eye diseases. Optometrists can prescribe some eye medications in certain Australian states.

An ophthalmologist is a medical doctor who has specialised in the treatment of eye problems. They undergo a medical degree (five-six years), followed by some years of general medical experience, and a further four years or more of training in the management of eye related diseases. Ophthalmologists can prescribe glasses, but spend the majority of their time diagnosing and treating diseases of the eye. As doctors, they can prescribe medications (both eye drops and other medications). Ophthalmologists perform procedures on the eye, such as different forms of laser and eye surgery.

Where should people go if they suspect they have an eye problem?

This will depend on the nature of the problem and what services are available. The most important point is that when an eye problem occurs, we should seek advice as soon as possible, either from your optometrist, local doctor, emergency department of the local hospital, or ophthalmologist, who can then refer you for further treatment if required. Capital cities also have eye emergency departments, such as that found at Sydney Eye Hospital. The eye emergency department can see you for any urgent eye related problem. They can also be contacted by telephone for advice if you are not sure about the appropriate place to seek attention.

What are 'spots before the eyes', or floaters?

Floaters are due to clouding of the jelly inside the eye, known as the vitreous. It is a very common problem, which in most people is harmless. However, it can be a sign of serious disease, such as retinal detachment. Floaters should always be checked to exclude a serious cause. This will involve dilating the pupils with special drops and checking the back part of the eye.

Some problems related to floaters make eye doctors more suspicious of a serious cause. If floaters are new, or occur with flashes of light, or with worsening vision such as a 'curtain' coming over the vision, people should seek urgent review from an eye doctor. Again, the emergency department of your eye hospital is one option when seeking urgent eye care.

What is 20/20 vision?

20/20 vision (or 6/6 vision in metric terms) means that a person can see a particular letter on a chart at 20 feet (6 metres), and that a normal person could also see this letter from 20 feet. In other words, the person has normal central vision. If a person cannot see that letter at 20 feet but can see a letter twice the size (ie a letter that a normal person would be able to see from 40 feet away) the vision is 20/40. We usually measure vision with people wearing appropriate spectacles or contact lenses.

Measuring vision in this way is only one of many tests we do to check vision, and does not give the whole picture. For instance, we check peripheral vision to diagnose glaucoma. The central vision may be normal even in advanced glaucoma, where a patient can only see a small 'tunnel' around the letter on the chart.

Can people wait too long to see eye doctors?

We occasionally see people who have waited too long to see an eye doctor. People should seek attention whenever they have noticed a problem with their eyes. Urgent medical attention should be sought for rapid worsening of vision, eye pain and eye injuries.

Are over the counter eye drops for dry and irritated eyes safe to use?

Artificial teardrops are useful for people with dry or irritated eyes, often made worse by dry climates and air-conditioned environments. Long term use of drops which contain medications

to reduce eye redness are not recommended, as these can exacerbate the problem of redness 'rebounding' when the medication is stopped. People should seek medical advice if they suffer symptoms such as dry, irritated eyes, and urgent attention if the symptoms are worsening, drops are being used more than three times a day, or if vision is being affected.

What are normal expectations of eye health throughout life?

Childhood 20/20 vision normally develops within the first decade of life. Parents should be on the lookout for problems with vision eg difficulty seeing the blackboard, and turned eyes. There is some concern about increasing rates of short-sightedness (myopia), which may be related to children spending more time in front of close objects such as TV and computers rather than looking at distant objects outside. Eye protection from excessive UV exposure (hat, sunglasses) should be used.

Teenage

Most teenagers have good vision. Some will require glasses to have the best possible vision. Particular attention should be paid to eye protection with sports such as squash, and when starting work. Inexperienced workers are more prone to injury, and should always wear appropriate eye protection.

Middle Age

Most people will require reading glasses after the age of 40, and this should form a good reminder for people when having eye checks, to also check for other problems.

Old Age

Eye related problems become more common for older people, particularly cataracts, glaucoma and macular degeneration. Intervention and treatments should be sought for worsening vision. However the majority of people can expect to enjoy good vision into their old age.

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