

Aging and Your Eyes

Adapted from the National Institute on Aging

Aunt Rose used to read all the time but lately she complains that the words are blurry and hard to follow. Grandpa Joe just hammered his thumb for the third time this month. Last week Nancy's doctor suggested her mom needs cataract surgery.

Age can bring changes that affect your eyesight. But regular eye exams can help. With early detection, many eye problems can be treated and your risk of vision loss reduced.

Five Steps to Safeguard Your Eyesight

- \$ Have regular physical exams by your doctor to check for diseases like diabetes. Such diseases can cause eye problems if not treated.
- \$ Have a complete eye exam with an eye care professional every 1 to 2 years. The eye care professional should put drops in your eyes to enlarge (dilate) your pupils. This is the only way to find some eye diseases, such as glaucoma, that have no early signs or symptoms. The eye care professional should check your eyesight, your glasses, and your eye muscles.
- \$ Find out if you are at high-risk for vision loss. Do you have a family history of diabetes or eye disease? If so, you need to have a dilated eye exam every year.
- \$ See an eye care professional at once if you have any loss or dimness of eyesight, eye pain, fluid coming from the eye, double vision, redness, or swelling of your eye or eyelid.
- \$ Wear sunglasses and a hat with a wide brim when outside. This will protect your eyes from too much sunlight, which can raise your risk of getting cataracts.

Common Eye Complaints

The following common eye complaints often happen with age. In most cases, they can be treated easily. Sometimes, they signal a more serious problem.

- \$ **Presbyopia** (prez-bee-OH-pee-uh) is a slow loss of ability to see close objects or small print. It is a normal process that happens as you get older. Signs of presbyopia include holding your reading materials at arm's length or getting headaches or tired eyes when you read or do other close work. Reading glasses can often fix the problem.
- \$ **Floaters** are tiny spots or specks that seem to float across your eyes. You might notice them in well-lit rooms or outdoors on a bright day. Floaters can be normal. But sometimes they are a sign of a more serious eye problem, such as retinal detachment. This often is the case if you see light flashes along with floaters. If you notice a sudden change in the type or number of spots or flashes, see your eye care professional right away.

- \$ **Tearing** (or having too many tears) can come from being sensitive to light, wind, or temperature changes. Tearing also can come from having dry eye. Protecting your eyes (by wearing sunglasses, for example) may solve the problem. Sometimes, tearing may mean a more serious eye problem, such as an infection or a blocked tear duct. Your eye care professional can treat both of these conditions.
- \$ **Corneal diseases and conditions** can cause redness, watery eyes, pain, reduced vision, or a halo effect. The cornea is the clear, dome-shaped “window” at the front of the eye. It helps to focus light that goes into the eye. Disease, infection, injury, toxic agents, and other things can harm the cornea. Treatments include changing your eyeglass prescription, using eye drops, or in severe cases, having surgery, including corneal transplantation. Corneal transplantation is a common treatment that works well and is safe.
- \$ **Eyelid problems** can come from different diseases or conditions. Common eyelid complaints include pain, itching, tearing, or being sensitive to light. Eyelid problems often can be treated with medicine or surgery.
- \$ **Conjunctivitis** (also called pink eye) happens when the tissue that lines the eyelids and covers the cornea becomes inflamed. It can cause itching, burning, tearing, or a feeling that something is in your eye. Conjunctivitis can be due to allergies or an infection. Infectious pinkeye can easily spread from one person to another. It is a common eye problem that your eye care professional can treat.

Eye Diseases and Disorders

The following eye problems are common with age. Often these can develop with few or no symptoms. Each can lead to vision loss and blindness. Having regular eye exams is the best way to protect yourself. If your eye care professional finds a problem early, a lot can be done to keep your eyesight.

- \$ **Cataracts** are cloudy areas in the eye’s lens. Normal lenses are clear and let light through. Cataracts keep light from easily passing through the lens. This causes loss of eyesight. Cataracts often form slowly without any symptoms. Some stay small and don’t change eyesight very much. Others may become large or thick and harm vision. Cataract surgery can help. Your eye care professional can watch for changes in your cataract over time to see if you need surgery. Cataract surgery is very safe. It is one of the most common surgeries done in the United States.
- \$ **Dry eye** happens when tear glands don’t work well. Dry eye can be uncomfortable. It can cause itching, burning, or even some vision loss. Your eye care professional may suggest using a home humidifier or special eye drops (artificial tears). More serious cases of dry eye may need surgery.
- \$ **Glaucoma** comes from too much fluid pressure inside the eye. Over time, the disease can damage the optic nerve. This leads to vision loss and blindness. Loss of vision doesn’t happen until there has been a large amount of nerve damage. Most people with glaucoma have no early symptoms or pain from increased pressure. You can protect yourself by having regular, dilated eye exams. Treatment may be prescription eye drops, medicines you take by mouth, or surgery.

\$ **Retinal disorders** are a leading cause of blindness in the United States. The retina is a thin lining on the back of the eye. It is made up of cells that get visual images and pass them on to the brain. Retinal disorders that affect aging eyes include:

- *Age-related macular degeneration (AMD)*. AMD affects the part of the retina (the macula) that gives you sharp central vision. Over time, AMD can ruin the sharp vision needed to see objects clearly and to do common tasks like driving and reading. In some cases, AMD can be treated with lasers to help reduce the risk of increased vision loss. Ask your eye care professional about recent research suggesting that some dietary supplements reduce the risk of AMD.
- *Diabetic retinopathy*. This common complication of diabetes happens when small blood vessels stop feeding the retina as they should. Laser surgery and a treatment called vitrectomy can help. If you have diabetes, be sure to have an eye exam through dilated pupils every year.
- *Retinal detachment*. This happens when the inner and outer layers of the retina become separated. If you notice changes in floaters and/or light flashes in your eye, either all at once or over time, see your eye care professional at once. With surgery or laser treatment, doctors often can reattach the retina and bring back all or part of your eyesight.

Low vision affects some people as they age. Low vision means you cannot fix your eyesight with glasses, contact lenses, medicine, or surgery. It can get in the way of your normal daily routine. You may have low vision if you:

\$ have trouble seeing well enough to do everyday tasks like reading, cooking, or sewing;

\$ can't recognize the faces of friends or family;

\$ have trouble reading street signs; or

\$ find that lights don't seem as bright as usual.

If you have any of these problems, ask your eye care professional to test you for low vision. There are many things that can help. Aids can help you read, write, and manage daily living tasks. Lighting can be adjusted to your needs. You also can try prescription reading glasses, large-print reading materials, magnifying aids, closed-circuit televisions, audio tapes, electronic reading machines, and computers that use large print and speech.

Other simple changes also may help:

\$ Write with bold, black felt-tip markers.

- \$ Use paper with bold lines to help you write in a straight line.
- \$ Put colored tape on the edge of your steps to help you avoid a fall.
- \$ Install dark-colored light switches and electrical outlets that you can see easily against light colored walls.
- \$ Use motion lights that turn on by themselves when you enter a room. These may help you avoid accidents caused by poor lighting.
- \$ Use telephones, clocks, and watches with large numbers, and put large-print labels on the microwave and stove.

Less than perfect vision does not have to hamper your lifestyle. By having regular eye exams you will be doing your part to take care of your eyes.

Resources

To learn more about eye care contact:

The National Eye Institute (NEI)

2020 Vision Place
Bethesda, MD 20892-3655
Phone: 301-496-5248
Website: www.nei.nih.gov

The National Institute on Aging (NIA), part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), distributes *Age Pages* and other materials on a wide range of topics related to health and aging. For a list of free publications contact:

National Institute on Aging Information Center

P.O. Box 8057
Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057
Phone: 1-800-222-2225
TTY: 1-800-222-4225
Website: www.nia.nih.gov

The Health Promotion Unit at the NYC Department for the Aging conducts lectures on Aging and Your eyes for senior groups. For further information contact 311.