



Through Women's Eyes

Planning for a Lifetime of Healthy Vision

By Jonna Jefferis

While research shows that women live longer and often have greater stamina than men, when it comes to vision health, men have the edge. Women account for two-thirds of blindness and visual impairment in the U.S. A large part of the reason is that, on average, women outlive men, increasing their risk of developing such age-related eye diseases as macular degeneration, cataracts and glaucoma.

But that's not the whole story. Up to the age of around 60, more women than men are affected by myopia (nearsightedness). Women face other risks to eye health that men do not, due to lifestyle differences and hormonal changes during pregnancy and menopause.

Your Changing Eyes

Many of the physical changes that women experience during their lifetimes are hormone-related. During pregnancy, increased hormone production and vascular changes may cause swelling not only of the hands and feet, but also of the eyes. As a result, contact lenses may become uncomfortable. New lens prescriptions may be needed both during and after pregnancy.

Hormonal changes can also cause dry eye syndrome, a condition caused by a defect in the eye's tear-producing glands. With fewer tears, eyes are not sufficiently lubricated. Dry eye is not harmful, but can be very uncomfortable. Of the 5 million American sufferers over age 50, more than 3 million are women. Why? Researchers discovered that an abundance of male hormones protect men's eyes by aiding tear production.

Another hormone-related study suggested that postmenopausal women who use hormone replacement therapy (HRT) may be at a greater risk of developing dry eye syndrome than other women.

Preventive Eye Care

Now for the good news: Three-quarters of visual impairment is estimated to be preventable or treatable. The single most important thing you can do to protect your eye health is to **visit an eye care professional on a regular basis for a comprehensive examination.**

It's also important to make healthy choices in your everyday life. You already know the dangers of smoking, eating the wrong foods and staying in the sun too long, but you may not be aware of how such behavior impacts your eyes.

Smoke in Your Eyes. A study from the University of Manchester (UK) found that smokers were two to three times more likely to develop age-related macular degeneration (AMD) than non-smokers. Researchers determined that non-smokers living with smokers were also at risk. In addition to



AMD, smoking has been linked to development of cataracts, glaucoma and diabetic retinopathy.

Eye-Healthy Foods. AMD, cataracts and dry eye syndrome can be delayed and sometimes prevented by eating a healthy diet. Vitamins A, C and E, beta-carotene, lutein, zeaxanthin and zinc supplements have been found to significantly improve eye health. Eating at least two servings of fish per week can also help to protect against AMD.

Avoid Sun Damage. People who work or play in the sun for long periods of time risk eye damage caused by the sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays. Long-term sunlight exposure in small amounts increases the likelihood of developing cataracts, AMD or skin cancer on the eyelids.

When outdoors, wear a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses that block 99% to 100% of all UV rays. Because most exposure to harmful UV rays occurs before age 18, make sure that your children are protected, as well.

Mascara Mishaps

It is easy to injure, irritate or infect your eyes through improper use of makeup. To minimize your risk:

- Never share makeup with anyone. This includes other women testing colors at a store's cosmetic counter.
- Wash hands before applying eye cosmetics, and keep applicators and brushes clean.
- Always use a mirror to apply eye makeup, and hold still.
- Never apply eye makeup in a

Chemistry 101

Most eye injuries can be avoided simply by being careful and using common sense. It is easy, however, to overlook the inherent risks of products you use daily. Misuse of cosmetics, hair spray and nail polish can cause eye inflammations, injuries and even burns. To protect your eyes:

- Apply hair spray or spray deodorant before inserting your contact lenses. Close your eyes while spraying, and then leave the area to avoid lingering mist.
- Use care when applying face creams, sunning lotions and skin medications near the eyes. Wash your hands after each application.
- Do not hold the phone receiver to your ear while drying polish on your fingernails. If you have ever done this, your eyes probably burned from their close proximity to your wet nails.



moving vehicle. All it takes is one sudden stop or bump in the road to cause an eye injury. Even a slight scratch could result in serious infection.

- Do not use any sharp-pointed tool (such as a pin) to separate eyelashes, for the same reason. Using a hard-tipped pencil eyeliner is also a bad idea.
- Do not apply eyeliner to the inner edge of either lid, where it can clog tiny pores and cause infection.
- Remove makeup at the end of the day. If you wear ointment or cream on your face at night, allow it to dry

(or sink well into your skin, if dryness is not the goal) before going to bed.

- Discard all eye cosmetics after three months.

Eye health is related to overall physical health, and if you have already incorporated into your daily life such healthy behaviors as exercising, eating nutritious foods and being aware of injury risks in your environment, you have done much to fulfill the health requirements of your eyes. With proper care, you can enjoy the benefits of healthy eyesight for many years to come.