

Medical & Child Care News



The Aging Eye

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As we grow older, we often begin to experience changes in our bodies and general health such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and elevated cholesterol. We are often reminded by our primary care providers to get regular check ups to diagnose and manage these health problems. Oftentimes, we forget that our eyes are aging as well. There are several eye problems that are seen more commonly as we grow older. Some of these include presbyopia, cataracts, glaucoma and macular degeneration. I will briefly discuss the signs, symptoms, diagnosis and treatment of each of these common eye problems.

In your late thirties to early forties, you may notice that you are having more difficulty reading small print or seeing small details up close. You may find yourself holding your newspaper farther away in order to see it more clearly. This condition is called presbyopia. Presbyopia occurs when the eye loses the ability to focus up close or accommodate. As the lens in the eye ages, it becomes more rigid and does not change its shape as easily making it more difficult to focus with close up viewing. The eye naturally continues to lose accommodation and by the time we reach our fifties, it is completely gone. Your eye doctor will check your vision with reading and prescribe reading glasses or bifocals to aid you in viewing small print.

Cataracts form when the lens of the eye becomes cloudy making it difficult to see through. Often, the first sign that you are developing

cataracts is that you may have difficulty driving at night due to glare or halos from oncoming headlights. The vision may become blurred with distance viewing or with reading. Your risk of developing cataracts increases with age. Certain factors such as medications, systemic diseases, and family history can lead cataract development at an earlier age. Your eye doctor will test your vision and determine if your vision can be improved with new glasses or contact lenses. Sometimes a glare test will be done to see if light shone on the eye creates glare that significantly reduces the vision. If you do have significant glare or vision that cannot be sufficiently corrected with lenses, it may be time to have surgery to remove your cataract. Your doctor will talk with you about the risks, benefits, complications and alternatives prior to cataract surgery.

Glaucoma is another common eye disease that becomes more prevalent with age. Glaucoma occurs when the fibers in optic nerve begin to degenerate. Glaucoma can be associated with higher pressure in the eye, but not always. The disease is usually painless and often, there are no signs or symptoms until the disease has progressed. Glaucoma is detected by having regular dilated eye exams at least once a year. Your eye doctor will discuss your family history and medical history, check your eye pressure, and examine your optic nerves. If necessary, additional testing will be done such as a visual field. Glaucoma can cause decreased peripheral vision, and the visual field test is very sensitive for detecting changes in the peripheral vision. Treatment for glaucoma includes eye drops, laser treatment, and sometimes surgery.

Macular degeneration can lead to slow or rapid onset of central visual loss. The center of the retina or macula begins to degenerate and causes distortion or loss of vision in the central visual field. Risk factors for macular degeneration include family history, smoking, obesity, hypertension, and hypercholesterolemia. Advanced age is a risk factor for vision loss in people with macular degeneration. Your eye doctor will dilate your eyes and examine you for signs of macular degeneration. The signs include drusen, bleeding, fluid, scarring, or pigment clumping in the macula. Often, you will be given a special grid to use at home to monitor changes in your vision. Treatment for macular degeneration can include laser, vitamins, and injections in the eye.

The prevalence of presbyopia, cataracts, glaucoma and macular degeneration increases with age. However family history and other factors determine if or when a person may be afflicted by these and other eye conditions. At times, these conditions can arise and you may experience few symptoms initially. Thus, an annual eye exam should be a regular component of your health maintenance just like your yearly routine physical.

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