



Your Aging Eyes

It's a fact of life that as time passes and one year turns into the next, we all grow old. Despite the many ways we may try to mask any external signs of aging and strive for a more youthful appearance, there are physical changes that go beyond the wrinkles, affecting the way we move, view and hear the world.

Getting older and the changes it brings about are the result of complex processes that are influenced by genetics, environment, diet, lifestyle, and medical conditions as well as other factors. Your eyes and vision are not immune to the changes that come with time. As the ability of the cornea, lens, retina or optic nerve to properly focus entering light and transmit messages to the brain becomes impaired in any way, the quality of your eyesight diminishes.

In your 40s, you may begin to notice that reading and other tasks such as threading a needle have become a bit more challenging. You may also find that you need to hold a book or a newspaper a little farther away to see the text on the page more clearly. As frustrating as it seems, this decreasing ability to focus on objects or written words up close, which is known as presbyopia, is considered part and parcel of the natural aging process of the eye. It develops as the lens of the eye and the ring of muscle fibers where light enters the eye lose their flexibility over time.

While developing presbyopia and requiring reading glasses when you reach middle age is pretty much a normal fact of life, there are other potential vision changes at this stage of life that may be indicative of more serious eye conditions. Since many eye diseases develop painlessly, you may not notice the changes to your vision until the condition is quite advanced. For this reason, eye doctors recommend a baseline eye exam at the age of 40. By performing an examination at this time, your optometrist can identify problems early in their onset, when treatment and management are most effective at preserving vision.

With advancing age, your risk of eye disease increases. The four most common age-related eye diseases are:

- Glaucoma
- Age-related Macular Degeneration
- Diabetic Retinopathy
- Cataracts

In addition to these common age-related eye conditions, the incidence of problems such as dry eye, floaters, and retinal detachment also occur with greater frequency in older adults.

According to statistics, one in three adults in the United States will have some type of vision impairment by the age of 65. And, if you are 65 or older, it's important to have your eyes checked every year or two as advised by your eye doctor to assess the health of your eyes and the quality of your vision. Annual eye exams are essential for older adults and even those under the age of 40, who have a family history of glaucoma or macular degeneration, or suffer from systemic conditions such as diabetes or high blood pressure.

The health of your eyes is essential to your overall function and quality of life. Older individuals with vision impairments may be more susceptible to falls, episodes of depression and have more difficulty bathing, dressing as well as walking around the house. However, with advances in diagnostic technology and care, many eye conditions can be detected early in their onset and successfully treated or managed to help preserve vision and make the performance of daily activities easier.

Of course, the best way to maintain optimal eye health as you get older, and to protect yourself against age-related vision loss, is by making healthy lifestyle choices and partnering with your optometrist to get routine exams and care.