

# *Eye Exams and Guarding Against Glaucoma*



## *Your eyesight is a precious gift...*

Your eyesight is a precious gift and guarding against vision loss is essential to maintaining your quality of life. By taking the simple step of making a comprehensive eye examination part of your healthcare routine you can protect your vision for a lifetime.

As part of a comprehensive eye examination, every aspect of your vision is assessed. In addition to determining your proper eyeglass or contact lens prescription, the optometrist will screen for eye diseases that can lead to vision loss, and check for any other problems that may affect eye health. Your eyes can also be an indicator of your overall health. During an exam, warning signs of underlying medical conditions such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or diabetes may also be detected.

Seeing the optometrist for regular comprehensive eye exams is increasingly important for older adults. Cataracts, glaucoma, and macular degeneration are more common in seniors. To effectively manage these disorders and prevent any associated vision loss involves timely diagnosis and care. For these reasons, a baseline eye examination is recommended for adults at age 40 and even earlier for those with underlying medical conditions that contribute to the risk of eye disease. Moreover, adults 65 and older should have their eyes checked at least every year or two as recommended by their eye doctor.

One of the leading causes of irreversible blindness worldwide is glaucoma. According to the Glaucoma Research Foundation, there are an estimated 60 million cases across the globe. In the United States alone more than 3 million people are afflicted with glaucoma, and 120,000 have gone blind from the disease. However, because many types of glaucoma develop without any pain or symptoms, an individual who has not had routine eye care may be completely unaware that they have glaucoma until significant damage to their vision has taken place.

Glaucoma refers to a group of related eye disorders that damage the optic nerve. It is a progressive disease that diminishes the capacity of the optic nerve to transmit visual information to the brain. When left untreated or uncontrolled, it results in a gradual and irreversible loss of vision. Peripheral vision is initially impaired followed by a decrease in central vision and an eventual complete loss of sight. While the most common types of glaucoma exhibit a symptom-free and gradual onset, there are less frequent forms of the disease where severe symptoms may suddenly occur. The acute onset of blurry vision, halos around lights, intense eye pain, nausea, and vomiting requires immediate emergency care.



The exact cause of glaucoma is unknown. Although it is most often associated with an increase of fluid pressure within the eye (intraocular pressure), there are instances where it develops in individuals having normal or low intraocular pressure. While everyone at every age is at risk for glaucoma, it is much more common in older individuals.

Risk factors that may be linked to many types of glaucoma include:

- High Intraocular pressure
- Age: Increased risk beginning in middle age
- Race: Higher incidence among African Americans & Hispanics in the U.S.
- A Family History of Glaucoma
- Extreme Nearsightedness
- Medical Conditions: Diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease
- Eye surgery, injury, tumors
- Eye anatomy

Currently, there is no cure for glaucoma and no treatment to restore the sight that has been lost. However, in most cases, the disease can be controlled and the remaining vision preserved. Treatment varies depending on the severity of the disease. Current therapies for the most common form of glaucoma are aimed at reducing the intraocular pressure. Treatment may include eye drops, pills, laser procedures or surgical operations to slow down the progression of the disease and prevent further damage. The outcome of care depends largely on compliance with the prescribed therapy.

As new research delves into the basic mechanisms of glaucoma, there is hope for discoveries that will lead to a cure. However, until that day arrives the best way to protect the health of your eyes is to visit your optometrist for routine exams and care.