

Easy on the Eyes

Eight ways to preserve your sight

> It's a scenario Dr. Rachel Bishop would rather not encounter, and yet she does, time and again.

A healthy middle-aged adult who has never before been to the eye doctor accidentally scratches his eye and seeks treatment. As part of the diagnosis, Bishop, the chief of consult services at the National Eye Institute, performs a complete dilated eye exam. It's then she discovers that the patient has lost half of his visual field from glaucoma and doesn't even know it.

If the patient had come for an exam sooner, that vision loss could have been prevented and the glaucoma—an eye disease marked by damage to the optic

nerve that affects some 2.7 million people in the U.S. annually—could have been treated more effectively. But many people don't visit the eye doctor until they are having a problem, and that's a big mistake.

"One of the most common misconceptions people have about eye health is that if they are not having any problems with their eyes, then everything is fine," says Bishop, who practices general ophthalmology. "In truth, many of the early forms of eye disease don't cause any change in vision at all."

Do you see the importance of taking care of your eyes a little more clearly

now? Good. Here are eight easy things you can do to help keep your eyes healthy:

Have a comprehensive dilated eye exam. During a complete eye exam, a specialist uses eye drops to dilate the eye in order to see all the structures within, including the retina and optic nerve. This is the most reliable way to keep track of changes in the eye, including those caused by early stages of age-related macular degeneration and glaucoma, which often have no warning signs and can lead to blindness. After your first comprehensive dilated eye exam, your eye specialist will let you know when it's time to return for a follow-up.



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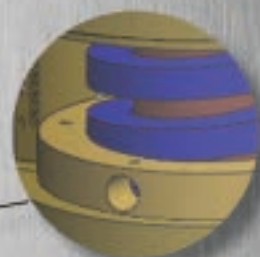
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The Right Connection™

Recognize that you could be seeing better. People can have healthy eyes but still not be seeing as well as they should. The most common vision problems are refractive errors, including nearsightedness, farsightedness, astigmatism and presbyopia, all of which occur when the shape of the eye prevents light from focusing directly on the retina. Glasses or contact lenses can help address such issues. In addition, nuisance problems such as eye strain and dry eyes can be easily treated by an eye doctor.

Eat your carrots. Mom was right. Carrots are good for your eyes. So are kale, chard and spinach. Eating a diet rich in fruits and vegetables, especially dark, leafy greens, is important for keeping your eyes healthy. And eat your salmon, tuna and halibut, too. Research has shown there are eye benefits from eating fish that's high in omega-3 fatty acids.

Be protected. Wearing protective eyewear when playing sports or working under the car or doing yardwork helps keep projectiles from damaging your eyes. Protective eyewear includes safety glasses and goggles, safety shields, and eye guards specially designed to provide the correct protection for a certain activity. Most protective eyewear lenses are made of polycarbonate, which is 10 times stronger than other plastics.

Don't smoke. Research has linked smoking to an increased risk of developing age-related macular degeneration, cataracts and optic nerve damage, which can lead to blindness. For healthy eyes, quit smoking or don't start in the first place.

Wear your shades. The sun's ultraviolet rays damage the surface of your eyes by causing thickening of the whites of the eyes, the conjunctiva. This can cause the area to become inflamed,

dry and painful. The sun also affects the deeper structures of the eye, including the lens and retina. When buying sunglasses, look for those that block 99 to 100 percent of both UV-A and UV-B radiation.

Know your family's history. Many eye diseases, including glaucoma, are hereditary. Talk to your family and learn about your health history so that you can be aware of what eye diseases you may be at a greater risk of developing.

If it's good for your heart, it's good for your eyes. Those very same guidelines for keeping your heart healthy—eat well, exercise, control diabetes and hypertension—are useful for keeping your eyes healthy, too. Maintaining a healthy weight is of special importance since being overweight or obese increases your risk of developing diabetes and other systemic conditions that can lead to vision loss. ■

