



SENIORS AND AGING – VISION CARE

The Issue

As people get older, it is normal for their vision to change. However, there are steps you can take to preserve your eye-sight and improve your vision – an important part of staying safe and independent.

Background

The effects of aging on vision can range from mildly irritating changes to serious eye diseases. Changes may include:

- Difficulty reading small print
- Taking longer to adjust from light to dark
- More sensitivity to glare from sunlight or unshielded light bulbs
- Loss of depth perception, which makes it difficult to judge distances
- Difficulty in seeing contrasts and colour
- Dry eyes
- Tearing or watery eyes.

Because vision is so vital to daily living, it is important to recognize the changes. Having your eyes examined regularly can help to detect problems early on and help maintain good vision.

For most seniors, normal age-related vision loss can be corrected with glasses, medication, or surgery. Even with more serious conditions, using vision aids and making changes to their homes and routines can help seniors stay safe and independent.

There are also many services available to help seniors adjust to vision loss.

Symptoms of Vision Loss

As you age, you or someone else may notice that you are experiencing symptoms of vision deterioration. Signs include:

- Squinting and/or a greater sensitivity to light
- Choosing bright over dull coloured objects or clothing
- Spilling food or drinks because you misjudge where items are
- Finding it hard to copy from written texts
- Becoming clumsy, such as having difficulty threading a needle or buttoning a shirt
- Seeing flashes of light or rapid movement from the corners of your eyes
- Having difficulties with driving at night
- Experiencing uncontrolled eye movement
- Making driving mistakes, such as missing street signs or traffic signs
- Falling because of a missed step or an unseen object on the floor.



Serious Health Effects of Vision Loss

In addition to the above changes and symptoms, there are several diseases and conditions that can affect vision.

Cataracts

Cataracts are a gradual clouding of the natural lens of the eye, preventing light from reaching the retina. The clouding may prevent you from being able to read or drive unless the cataract is removed. Fortunately, this is one of the most successful surgeries done in medicine today and is quite common.

Floaters

Floaters are tiny spots or specks that float across your field of vision. They are often normal and sometimes moving the eye around will make the spots shift out of your central vision. However, if you notice a sudden change in the number or types of spots, or if they come with light flashes, you should see your eye doctor as soon as possible. They may be signs of a serious eye disease.

Glaucoma

Glaucoma develops when the pressure within the eye starts to destroy the nerve fibres within the retina. If not treated early, glaucoma can cause vision loss and blindness. Because most people have no early symptoms, regular eye examinations are required to detect it. Treatment may include eye drops, medication, or surgery.

Age-related macular degeneration

Macular degeneration occurs when the macula (the central part of the retina responsible for sharp focus) is damaged. This damage may be the result of many factors, including aging, and it causes permanent loss of central vision. Regular eye exams can detect the disease early on and laser treatments can slow down the central vision loss.

Diabetic retinopathy

As the name suggests, this is an eye problem linked to diabetes. Changes to the blood vessels caused by diabetes can starve the retina of oxygen. This condition can go through many stages and can result in blindness. Symptoms include cloudy vision and seeing spots. If you have diabetes, be sure to have regular eye examinations and tell your eye specialist that you are diabetic. Treatment can slow down vision loss. Laser treatment in the early stages is often successful.

Minimizing Your Risk

There are many steps you can take to protect your vision.

- If you are over the age of 45, have your eyes examined on a regular basis.
- If you suffer from dry eyes (gritty, itchy, or burning), a home humidifier and eye drops may help. In a few serious cases, surgery may be needed to correct the problem.
- If your eyes water, it may be that you are more sensitive to

light, wind, or temperature change. Simply shielding your eyes or wearing sunglasses may solve the problem. However, this condition may be the result of an eye infection, eye irritation, or a blocked tear duct, all of which can be treated. See your doctor to find out the exact cause and treatment.

- Turn on the lights. Seeing better can sometimes be as easy as changing a light bulb to one with a higher wattage. Putting 100 or 150 watt bulbs in your lamps can reduce eye strain. Just make sure the fixture is designed for that wattage. Bright light is important in stairways to help prevent falls.
- Don't smoke. Smoking tobacco is a major risk factor in the early onset of age-related macular degeneration.
- Reduce glare as much as possible by using good lampshades, glare shields on computer monitors, and sunglasses. Sunglasses should provide 99 to 100% UV-A and UV-B protection. UV rays can harm your eyes even on a cloudy day.
- Protect your eyes from accidents in your home.
- Put a grease shield over frying foods.
- Make sure spray cans and nozzles are pointed away from you when spraying.
- Wear safety glasses in the workshop and when using chemical products such as ammonia.



- Be careful of a recoil when using bungee cords.
- Eat your carrots. A daily dose of the vitamins and minerals found in melons, citrus fruit, carrots, spinach, and kale may help slow the progress of age-related eye diseases such as macular degeneration, glaucoma, and cataracts.
- Don't drive at night if you have problems with depth perception, glare, or other vision difficulties.

Government of Canada's Role

The Public Health Agency of Canada is committed to promoting and protecting the health and well-being of Canadians. Its Division of Aging and Seniors in particular, disseminates information on healthy aging and encourages seniors' health promotion.

Need More Info?

For more information on eye care for seniors, contact the following.

Vision Care Info-sheet for Seniors
www.phac.aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/pubs/info_sheets/vision_care/index.htm

Canadian Ophthalmological Society
www.eyesite.ca

Canadian National Institute for the Blind
www.cnib.ca
(416) 486-2500

Or visit:

The Public Health Agency of Canada's Division of Aging and Seniors Web site at:
www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/

Health Canada's Seniors section at:
www.hc-sc.gc.ca/jfy-spv/seniors-aines_e.html

For additional articles on health and safety issues go to the It's Your Health Web site at:
www.healthcanada.gc.ca/iyh
You can also call toll free at 1-866-225-0709 or TTY at 1-800-267-1245*