

BLIND IGNORANCE

Thousands of New Zealanders have problems with their vision every year. Some of these problems can cause permanent vision loss and even blindness.

Save our Sight Month (September) has been an annual event since 2002 when the country's optometrists took note of the fact that 20% of the people accessing services for the blind had lost their sight from preventable causes.

For eye conditions that result in blindness, the only way to find them early is to have a comprehensive eye exam. For this reason NZAO optometrists, each year, take the opportunity to remind kiwis how precious their sight is and the importance of the 9-step comprehensive eye exam for maintaining good eye health.

The executive director of the New Zealand Association of Optometrists (NZAO), Dr Lesley Frederikson, says, "A 9-step comprehensive eye exam is a painless procedure in which an optometrist examines your eyes to look for common vision problems and eye diseases, many of which have no early warning signs. It is the smart thing to do if you don't want to end up disabled by low vision."

Even people who have perfect vision as a child or young adult can find their eyesight and eye health changes as they get older. People with gradual loss or change in vision can be most at risk because they simply don't realise what is happening to their eyes. People who do not have comprehensive eye exams at regular intervals may have undetected eye conditions that are slowly robbing them of sight – some changes may be irreversible.

"Some of the changes that may be brought on by disease or degenerative processes may be dismissed as a natural part of aging," Dr Frederikson says. "People who do not bother to have an eye examination may well be in denial about the sorts of changes that are occurring."

According to the NZAO, the number of New Zealanders with vision problems continues to rise. Diabetes, glaucoma, macular degeneration, cataract – these are major causes of impaired vision and all are increasing as the age of our population increases. There are also a number of other diseases which may arise in the brain or other parts of the body which affect vision and these may happen to young and old alike. Ocular melanoma or tumours near the optic nerves may be relatively uncommon, but they do happen; and if they do occur you want to find them early.

"You might think your vision is fine or that your eyes are healthy, but visiting your NZAO optometrist for a 9-step comprehensive eye exam is the only way to really make sure," Dr Frederikson says. "Some people don't realise they aren't seeing as well as they could and it is important to remember that many common eye diseases (glaucoma, diabetic eye disease age-related macular degeneration) often have no early-warning signs."

For more information:

Andrew Sangster (021 298 6075)

or Lesley Frederikson

New Zealand Association of Optometrists

Tel: 04 473-2322

Or search at www.nzao.co.nz for an optometrist near you.

Additional information on common blindness causing conditions follows:
For further resources www.saveoursight.co.nz



FOCUS ON ...

Fast Facts for Eye Health

Cataracts

These are the result of chemical changes in the lens of the eye and cause the clear lens to turn cloudy. Cataracts are the leading cause of vision loss.

Cause: Advancing age, heredity, injury, or disease.

Symptoms: Blurred or hazy vision, increased sensitivity to glare or the feeling of having a film over the eyes.

What you can do: Don't smoke and avoid over-exposure to bright sunlight.

Good News: Most people who undergo cataract surgery have significantly better vision afterwards. Optometrists can assess cataract and monitor the condition. At some stage surgery will be indicated but until then changes to spectacles or contact lenses can help people get the most out of their remaining eyesight.

Age-Related Macular Degeneration (AMD)

AMD is the leading cause of blindness and is caused by deterioration of cells in the macula (the part of the retina that is responsible for clear, sharp vision). Vision that is lost as a result of AMD cannot be restored.

Cause: Mainly heredity but smoking is also a contributing factor. There is increasing evidence that diet and high levels of exposure to bright sunlight may also play a part.

Symptoms: The gradual loss of ability to see clearly, distorted vision, a gradual loss of colour vision and a dark or empty area appearing in the centre of vision.

What you can do: Have regular eye examinations so as to be aware of any development of degenerative disease. Don't smoke. Eat a healthy diet containing fruits and vegetables high in vitamin C, vitamin E, beta-carotene, lutein and zeaxanthin. Keep overall fat intake low and eat lean meats and fish – omega 3 fatty acids are best. Milk, wholegrains and wheat germ will also provide zinc, which is also important. Smokers should avoid taking supplements containing beta-carotene but spinach is good for everyone.

Good News: There are now treatments for some forms of wet AMD and new research is pointing to treatments for the dry forms being developed as time goes on.

Glaucoma

Glaucoma NZ report that 10% of people over 70 will have glaucoma. Loss of vision occurs because of damage to cells in the retina.

Cause: The cause is not fully understood but high pressures in the eye and poor blood supply to the optic nerve are part of the condition. Genetics and age are also thought to be important factors.

Symptoms: Usually glaucoma progresses gradually and painlessly without symptoms. Rarely, glaucoma may occur rapidly with blurred vision, loss of side vision, coloured halos around lights and painful or red eyes.

What you can do: Have regular eye exams and if there is a family history of glaucoma see the optometrist for an eye examination every year. During the eye examination the optometrist will measure the internal pressure of both eyes and examine the health of the optic nerve.

Good News: If detected early, glaucoma can be managed and loss of vision prevented to a greater extent. Unfortunately, at least half the people with glaucoma are not having treatment because they do not know they have glaucoma. If glaucoma is not detected, it can lead to permanent blindness.



FOCUS ON ...

Fast Facts for Eye Health

Diabetes related retinopathy

People with diabetes are at risk of blindness and loss of vision because of the disease. There are at least 200,000 people with diabetes in New Zealand.

Cause: Diabetes causes changes in the cells of the retina that result in weakness in the walls of the blood vessels. These tiny blood vessels at the back of the eye begin to bulge and leak oozing blood into the eye. Cellular changes can also cause fats and fluid to leak into the surrounding tissues. Resulting damage to the eyes can lead to permanent loss of vision.

Symptoms: Although there may be no obvious signs in the early stages of the disease as it progresses people will notice rapid changes in vision and may have difficulty in achieving stable vision. They may also experience sensitivity to glare and reduced night vision.

What you can do: It is important for people with diabetes to keep their blood glucose levels under control, maintain a healthy weight, and get regular exercise. They need to be enrolled in the annual diabetes get checked program and take part in yearly screening for eye disease. If eye screening is not available then they should see their optometrist every year for a full eye exam.

Good News: People who maintain a healthy lifestyle and control blood glucose levels are less likely to develop diabetes related retinopathy. With annual screening any threats to sight that do develop can be detected and treated promptly minimizing the risk of permanent loss of vision.

Eye injuries

20,000 New Zealanders suffer eye injuries each year. A significant proportion of these injuries cause severe visual impairment or even blindness.

Cause: 35-40% of the more severe injuries actually occur in the home and garden. Some injuries are caused by unexpected things like plants, twigs, pliers, screwdrivers and even lawnmowers! Many are also caused by more familiar risks such as sharp nail or metal fragments produced by DIY tools like hammers, chisels, electric saws. Chemical splashes from paint strippers, acids/alkalis or concrete may also produce blinding damage to the surface of the eye.

Symptoms: Pain and trauma.

What you can do: Around 90% of these accidental eye injuries could be prevented by the use of simple safety spectacles or goggles.

Good News: People with enthusiasm for do-it-yourself activity are coming to realise that losing an eye over it is a bit much. A good example is being set by the experts on DIY and home improvement shows on the television where safety glasses or goggles are always used.

The 9-step Comprehensive Eye Exam

- medical history
- external eye
- slit-lamp examination
- internal eye including macula
- colour perception
- glaucoma
- visual functions
- eye muscles
- visual fields