

Eye Care



Healthy Eye Care Habits

Having healthy eyes can sometimes come down to smarter choices. There are a few simple, yet critical ways you can protect your sight, from having regular exams to dietary changes.

In some cases, injury or illness play a role. Family history can also be a direct indicator of problems ahead. Absent those outside influences, however, you can go a long way toward healthier eyes by following these helpful tips.

REGULAR EXAMS

It's easy to take eye health for granted. It's also not uncommon for small but worrisome changes to go virtually unnoticed with our sight. That's why it's so important to schedule regular comprehensive eye exams with an eye care professional. Some eye diseases, including age-related macular degeneration and diabetic eye disease, don't have any warning signs. A dilated exam is the only way to diagnose these issues in the critical early stages. Tests will also help make sure that glasses aren't needed or if you should change your prescription strength.

EATING RIGHT

Diets rich in dark, leafy

greens like spinach, collard greens or kale have been shown to improve eye health, according to researchers. There are also benefits in eating fish that boast higher levels of omega-3 fatty acids, like tuna, salmon and halibut. Being overweight is also a risk factor in failing eye sight, because it increases your risk of developing diabetes or diabetic eye disease. Consult a

physician if you need more guidance on creating a meal plan that bolsters eye health.

PROTECTIVE EYEWEAR

Safety glasses, shields, goggles and eye guards are critical for those who participate in certain sports, jobs involving machinery and activities like yard work where material might fly into our eyes. Most

of these protective lenses are now made of polycarbonate, which is some 10 times stronger than conventional plastics. You can find this safety equipment at sporting goods and outdoors stores, or at your local eye care office. Sunglasses are also important in protecting your eyes from day-to-day exposure to harmful ultraviolet rays. Look for glasses that specifically block

UV-A and UV-B radiation.

STOP SMOKING

If you haven't started smoking, don't start. If you already smoke, be aware that the risks aren't limited to your lungs. Smoking has been linked to increasing instances of cataracts, macular degeneration and optic-nerve damage. All of these issues can lead to blindness.



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What Causes Dry Eyes?

Most cases of dry eyes don't create long-term damage, if dealt with quickly. But dry eyes may be an indicator of a more serious condition.

The National Eye Institute reports that the average tear also includes fatty oils, mucus and thousands of proteins. These elements work in concert to protect the eye from the environment around you, while also keeping the surface smooth for ease in blinking.

Here's why the body might not produce enough tears and how you can find relief.

RISK FACTORS

Dry eyes may happen with both women and men, but women are more at risk to develop this condition — in particular following menopause. In general, it happens most commonly with older people, but dry eyes may be a sign of a more serious underlying problem for those of any age. Schedule an appointment with an eye doctor if you have any prolonged period of dryness. You may be suffering from blepharitis, ectropion or entropion or rheumatoid issues, according to the American Academy of Ophthalmology.

BEING DIAGNOSED

You'll usually undergo a



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comprehensive examination in order to confirm a diagnosis. The eye's external integrity will be evaluated, as well as your cornea and both eyelids. The doctor will also ask about any family history of dry eyes, while determining how serious your symptoms are and analyzing other general health issues.

In serious cases, the eye care specialist may decide to measure tear production using the

Schirmer method (which involves blotting strips under your eyes) or the phenol red-thread test (where a thread filled with pH-sensitive dye is placed over your lower lid).

TREATMENT OPTIONS

Unfortunately, a dry-eye diagnosis usually confirms that you'll have chronic issues — but there are treatments that can address them. Mild

cases may be treated with over-the-counter or prescription-strength supplemental tear solutions, according to the American Optometric Association. In some cases, topical steroids could be recommended.

Those suffering from more serious cases may require tear-duct implants that are meant to conserve tears. There is a dissolvable option

made of collagen and a semi-permanent version made of silicone. They may last anywhere from days to months. Tears then have no place to go except onto the surface of your eyes. In the worse-case scenario, patients are referred to surgery, where the ducts that allow excess tears into the nasal cavity are closed. It's an outpatient procedure, with local anesthetic.

Obesity and Your Vision

Being too overweight can lead to serious issues with your sight. We typically hear about the risks of diabetes, heart attack and high-blood pressure when discussing obesity. But it puts a strain on your eyes, too.

Being overweight is defined by body-mass index, or the ratio of your weight to your height. Those who have a number of 30 or higher are considered obese. Unfortunately, as many as one in three American adults exceed that figure, according to the American Heart Association.

The good news is, there's something you can do about it. Meanwhile, here's a look at the health issues facing those who are considered obese.



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DIABETES CONCERNS

People with diabetes should get regular dilated exams, according to the American Diabetes Association, since vision problems are typically associated with this disease. The most common symptom is blurred vision, which happens when a person's high-blood sugar levels lead to swelling in the lens of the eye. This change in shape is what creates a vision problem.

Diabetic patients often report this issue after eating too many carbohydrates. On the other hand, low-glucose levels are also an issue but not because of swelling. Instead, it impacts the brain's ability to focus your eyes.

HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

Your eyes rely on blood vessels to nourish important components like the optic

nerve, and the retina's inner and outer areas. These fragile pathways can become damaged or blocked as a result of high blood pressure, and vision problems follow. These vessels, called arterioles, are quite easily impacted since they're so small: Some are only half the width of the average human hair. Experts recommend a combination of dietary changes, exercise and

sometimes medication to control high blood pressure. Lowering your numbers can also have a positive impact on your eyes.

GETTING ON TRACK

If you're concerned about being overweight, the American Heart Association has some simple recommendations for turning the corner: Do at least a half hour of mod-

erate-intensity aerobic activity on five different days per week to improve cardiovascular health. In order to better regulate your blood pressure, you should average about 40 minutes of modern vigorous aerobic activity on at least three days a week. You should also watch what you eat. A doctor can help shape a dietary plan that addresses your particular needs.

Laser Vision Correction

Laser vision correction involves reshaping your cornea in order to correct various issues with the eye.

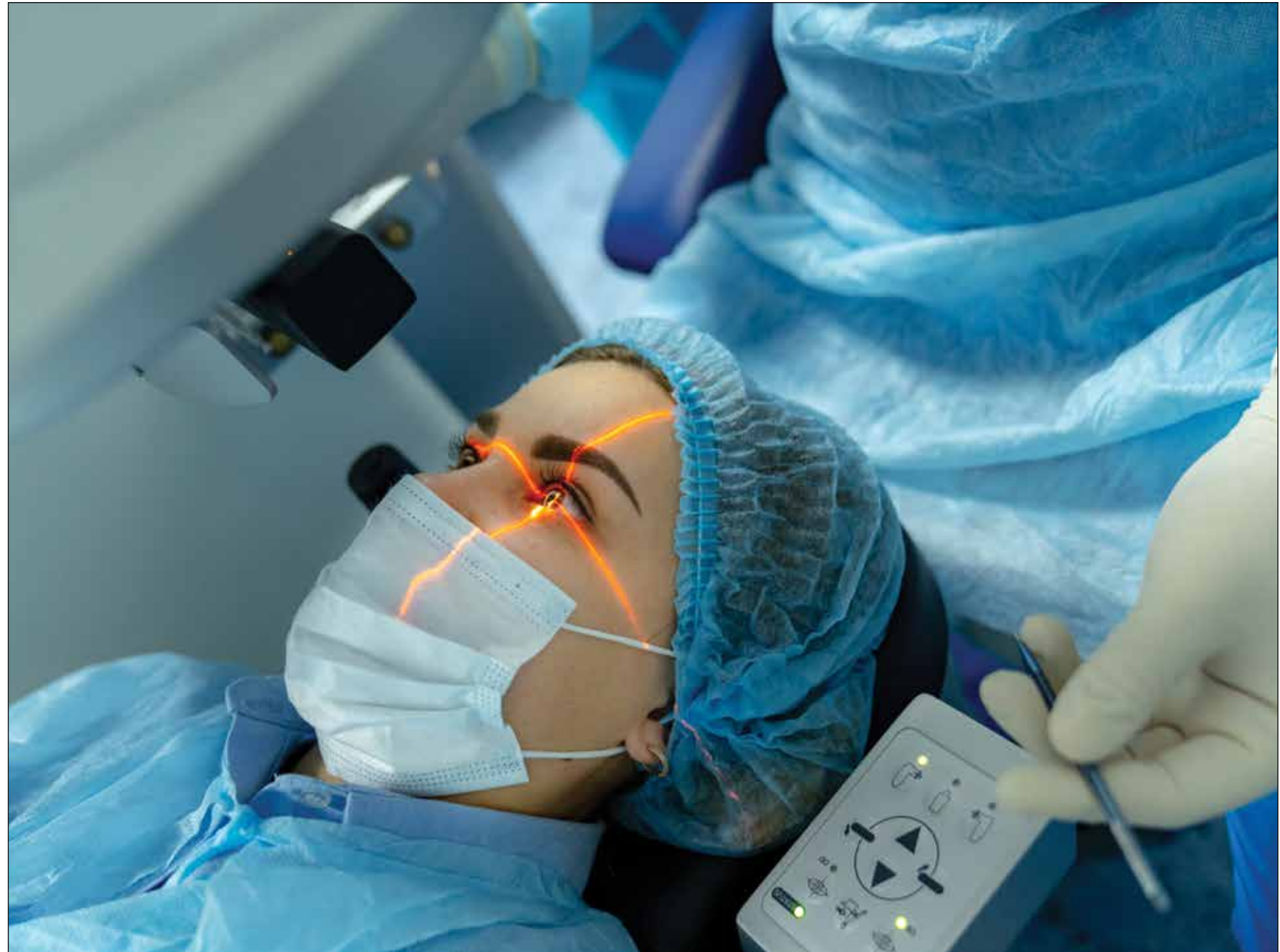
Sufferers are increasingly turning to laser eye surgery to correct common problems like being near- or far-sighted. The result could be a life free of glasses.

TRENDING UPWARD

LASIK, or laser-assisted in situ keratomileusis, was first approved by the FDA in 1998. A low risk of complications and high success rates confirmed by the American Academy of Ophthalmology led to a growing number of doctors to provide some version of the surgery. Today, millions have undergone laser vision procedures, with millions more to come. Most complaints relate to dry eye symptoms, which are typically only temporary. Some don't see the improvement they'd hoped for, a possible outcome that doctors will discuss prior to surgery.

BEFORE YOU GO

An eye evaluation is required before anyone is determined to be a good candidate for laser vision surgery. A doctor will take a close look to decide whether this procedure is right for you, or if you should consider an alternate path. They'll ask you to switch from contact lenses to glasses in the weeks



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leading up to this evaluation, since they can change the shape of your eye. This kind of laser surgery works by reshaping the cornea, so the eye needs to be in its natural state in order to provide the best surgical planning.

DURING SURGERY

The procedure usually takes

less than 30 minutes. Depending on the approach an incision may be made in the eye itself. Plastic plates may be used to flatten your cornea. Laser thermal keratoplasty involves creating a concentric circle of prescribed burns to the eye. Because this is an outpatient procedure, you will be awake when these things hap-

pen. There may be some physical or emotional discomfort, but as with common outcomes, your doctor will be able to provide more information about what to expect.

INTO RECOVERY

There are important precautions to take after surgery takes place to avoid potential known

risks. You will not have stitches so it's critically important to avoid rubbing your eyes. Eye care professionals typically recommend a shield to keep patients from accidentally hurting themselves. Watch closely for infection, severe pain or worsening vision. Contact your doctor if you notice any of these changes.

Finding the Right Glasses

So you've gotten a new prescription. Now what?

Their principal purpose is to correct a vision problem. But glasses also need to provide comfort and fashion, without breaking the bank.

If you're having trouble reading street signs or billboards, or find yourself squinting or with blurred vision, it's time to book an appointment with a trusted eye care professional. They'll perform a series of tests before prescribing corrective lenses.

Next you'll have to decide which lens material, added features and frames are right for you.

LENS CHOICES

They still call them glasses, but in truth lenses are manufactured using a number of different materials these days. Glass lenses made the frames too heavy — and they were, of course, easily damaged. More alarmingly, a broken lens put the wearer at risk of damage to the eye from shards of glass. Today, lenses are more typically made of high-index plastics, which provide the thinnest possible lens while also boasting a pleasing lightness and great affordability. The doctor will offer advice on which material is right in your particular situation.

FRAME CONSIDERATIONS

These new prescription



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glasses will likely sit on your nose for long periods of time each day. That means that comfort is key, but so is the look since they will become part of your overall wardrobe.

First, determine whether your prescription or insurance places some limit on the size, kind or brand of frames.

Then focus in on the frames that fit within those parameters, in consultation with an optician. Pay close attention to how they fit on your ears, and whether they blend well with your particular facial features. Try on as many as you need to until finding just the right blend of function and fashion.

AFFORDABILITY

Individual health insurance companies offer an incredibly wide variety of coverage plans, some of which take care of most or all of your eye care. On the other hand, other policies have very strict rules about how much they'll cover. There may be restrictions, for instance, on how often you

can get new frames. They might require you to pay for add-on options that help with scratches or glare. The average cost of prescription glasses will typically run into the hundreds of dollars, so it's important to know what you're responsible for prior to deciding. Those high-end frames may have to wait.

How To Prevent Loss of Vision

Millions suffer from corrective vision loss, some of them needlessly. Injury and disease can't always be prevented, but good habits can help ensure optimal vision for others.

Ophthalmology experts offer a range of tips to help prevent loss of vision, but it's important to discuss your plan with a local physician so that a custom plan can be created that addresses your particular situation. Their dilated eye exam will provide the most complete picture of your overall health.

Meanwhile, here's a list of generally recommended tips:

EYE PROTECTION

Shielding your eyes from harmful ultraviolet rays or particles and projectiles is one of the easiest ways to combat loss of vision. Sunglasses with UV-blocking lenses can prevent damage to the retina that may lead to the development of cataracts. They also protect the sensitive skin around your eyes, providing a barrier against skin cancer and wrinkles.

Protective eyewear can also help keep you from becoming one of the millions of people who injure their eyes each year, according to estimates from the American Academy



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of Ophthalmology. Sports, home improvement projects and even yard work provide ample opportunity to damage your eyes. Wear protective glasses, shields or other gear when there is an increased chance of injury.

HEALTHY CHOICES

Poor dietary choices or dangerous habits like smoking can cause known health issues

to your body, but they also have an adverse impact on your vision.

Tobacco has been linked with increased instances of age-related macular degeneration, according to the American Academy of Ophthalmology. Studies consistently show that macular degeneration happens more among those who smoke or once smoked than those who

never did. Diets high in leafy greens, vitamins E and C, zeaxanthin, omega-3 fatty acids, zinc and lutein are less likely to have issues with their sight — including age-related macular degeneration.

EYE CARE

Be particularly careful around your home when employing the hazardous chemicals found in bleach,

oven cleaners and solvents. Splatter from cooking with hot grease or oil also presents an every-day danger. Be especially aware of the dangers of misusing your contact lenses. Don't sleep in those that aren't approved for overnight use, don't use expired solutions or substitutes like water or saliva. Pay close attention to how long disposable versions are approved for wear.

Macular Degeneration

This deterioration sounds scary, but many still have useful vision. It's important to undergo regular exams to watch for age-related worsening, in case you suffer from an early onset.

The issue is defined as a degeneration of the portion of your retina which provides central vision. In some cases, there will only be a minimal impact. Even those with very advanced cases, however, may still be able to see by employing peripheral sight.

WHY DEGENERATION HAPPENS

Researchers don't yet know precisely why most macular degeneration occurs, though their studies indicate that it could be some combination of heredity and lifestyle factors like obesity, smoking and diet. The condition develops as the eye ages, sometimes due to deposit formations under the retina. In other instances, abnormal blood vessels grow under the retina, causing problems. But the natural aging process can also lead to the development of this condition, without any other compounding factors. Degeneration is more common with Caucasians.



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DIFFERENT TYPES

This deterioration is typically associated with the thinning of the eye's macula tissues due to aging. This is known as the "dry form." Vision loss is typically gradual, and those who develop the condition are simply urged to monitor their central vision for future changes. The good news is, early detection and following certain self-care

measures can delay your vision loss. Unfortunately, however, there is no cure. The version of macular degeneration involving abnormal blood vessels is commonly referred to as the "wet form." Some 10% of sufferers are diagnosed with this neovascular form, as new pathways grow under the retina and leak blood or fluid, leading to blurred vision.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Even without treatment, macular degeneration rarely causes total blindness all by itself. This deterioration also isn't uniform. In fact, it usually happens in just one eye, though the condition can manifest in the other eye later. Symptoms include dark areas in your vision, blurriness, distorted areas or complete loss of sight in your central vision

area. Many don't become aware that they're suffering from macular degeneration until it's diagnosed in a regular eye examination — or until they have a noticeable change in their vision. Those with high blood pressure or cardiovascular disease should take their medication, closely following doctor's recommendations on how to control the condition.