

# the importance of regular eye health exams



As we age, it's a fact of life that we face more chronic health challenges such as cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure and diabetes. That's why regular check ups with your doctor should be a part of a sound preventative health program. If you're having your blood pressure and cholesterol checks, PSA and breast screening, you're probably thinking you've covered the most important health bases.... you haven't!

The truth is, that eyes also age and become more at risk of age related conditions such as Glaucoma, Cataracts and Macular Degeneration. If you're not seeing your optometrist for regular eye health checks, then you're overlooking a vital part of your wellbeing package. These conditions can threaten your precious eye sight if not discovered and treated in the early stages. Glaucoma and Macular Degeneration are both "silent" in their early stages, gradually causing irreversible eye damage with few, if any, noticeable symptoms.

Having regular eye checks can also benefit your health in unexpected ways. Your optometrist may be the first health professionals to discover signs of impending or current serious health conditions such as high blood pressure and diabetes. Studies from the Center for Eye Research in Australia have shown that abnormalities of the blood vessels in the retina of the eye can be used to predict a patients risk for diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke and heart disease.

The retina is a membrane that lines the interior of the eyeball and receives the light that passes through the lens of the eye. Optometrists are able to view the blood vessels on the retina, and see abnormalities such as ballooning or narrowing, which may indicate the presence of cardiovascular disease or diabetes.

Type II diabetes is reaching epidemic proportions in New Zealand, and many sufferers are not aware of their condition. Undiagnosed diabetes can damage blood vessels, increasing risk of stroke and high blood pressure. Diabetes can also damage the tiny blood vessels on the retina, eventually causing bleeding into the eye, and vision loss or blindness. During a routine eye examination, your optometrist may be the first person to discover signs of undiagnosed diabetes.

## GLAUCOMA

Glaucoma is the number one cause of preventable blindness in New Zealand. There are several different

## Monthly Vision Health Bulletin

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*How you see, How you look.*

forms of glaucoma, each of which damage the optic nerve in the eye, resulting in vision loss, and eventually blindness. The optic nerve is a bundle of more than a million nerve fibres, connecting the retina to the brain. While Glaucoma is most common over the age of 60, increasing numbers of people in their mid forties are affected. A family history of the disease increases risk.

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The eye produces a small amount of fluid internally, to nourish itself. In a healthy eye the fluid is constantly drained away. The most common form of Glaucoma occurs when the fluid drainage is reduced and pressure builds up inside the eye, damaging the optic nerve.

At first glaucoma causes no symptoms, no pain, and vision is normal. Without treatment, people begin to notice that their peripheral (side) vision is worse, and they start to miss objects to the side. Gradually, they feel as if they're looking at the world through a tunnel.

There is no cure for Glaucoma, and damage that has occurred before detection cannot be reversed. However, if caught early and treated through drug therapy, eye drops, and/or surgery, further damage can be prevented and people can retain excellent vision their whole life.

## MACULAR DEGENERATION

Age Related Macular Degeneration or ARMD is the most frequent cause of severe vision loss in people over 50, in the western world, and 25 times more common as a cause of vision loss than diabetes related blindness. Around 2000 new cases of ARMD are diagnosed in New Zealand every year, with risk increasing as we age.

The macular is the most sensitive part of the retina, and is responsible for giving us clear central vision, for reading, driving and recognising facial expressions. There are two forms of Macular Degeneration – wet and dry, with dry the most common.

How do you know if you are developing ARMD? Symptoms include a change in vision, blurred or crowded words, a black or grey blob in the middle of the page, or wavy lines that should be straight.

While treatment options for dry ARMD are limited, there are pharmaceutical options for slowing the progression of wet ARMD. The earlier your optometrist diagnoses your condition, the more likely you are to halt progression of the disease.

Dietary change can significantly reduce risk of developing ARMD, and slow the progression in already established disease. A high intake of dietary fat (especially vegetable oils) increases the likelihood of progression to advanced disease. Processed, baked foods also increase risk. A diet rich in nuts, fish and fruits and vegetables reduces risk of developing macular degeneration.

Protecting your eyes from UV rays by always wearing 100% UV filter sunglasses on sunny days, will also reduce your risk of developing ARMD.

## CATARACTS

Aging, means cataract risk, and by the age of 80 around 50% of people will have had problems with cataracts. If you are a smoker; drink a lot of alcohol;

have diabetes or have spent a lot of time exposed to sunlight you are most at risk.

The eye lens is made up of water and protein. As we get older the protein in the lens begins to "clump" causing cloudy vision. When they are small, cataracts often cause no change in vision. As the lens clouds and changes colour, your perception of the world may take on a brownish shade, making it difficult to read, and distinguish colours. Other common symptoms include: problems with glare from bright lights; poor night vision; and double vision.

Early cataract symptoms can be improved with glasses, but eventually surgery becomes the only option.

Make an appointment to see your Carlisle Mason optometrist for your mid life vision wellness check.

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