

# Healthy Vision: Make It Last a Lifetime



Family matters. Few things are more gratifying than watching the children play at your family reunion, cooking your special dish, or laughing at old family photos. But imagine for a moment that you lost your ability to see. Enjoying these familiar sights would no longer be possible.

Americans agree that eyesight has a huge impact on their day-to-day lives and is one of the senses they fear losing most. However, people often do not pay attention to their vision unless they notice a problem. Many eye diseases and conditions have no early warning signs, so a person can have a potentially blinding eye disease and not even know it.

African Americans are at higher risk of developing eye diseases like glaucoma and diabetes-related eye problems. These diseases have no warning signs, and, if left untreated, can cause permanent vision loss. In fact, glaucoma is a leading cause of blindness in African Americans.

One of the most important things you can do to protect your vision is to get a comprehensive dilated eye exam. In this procedure, an eye care professional places drops in your eyes to dilate, or widen, the pupil to allow more light to enter the eye the same way an open door lets more light into a room. This allows your eye care professional to examine the back of the eyes for any signs of eye disease. Early detection and treatment can help to reduce your risk of vision loss and blindness.

“Diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma, and age-related macular degeneration [AMD] affect millions of Americans,” says Dr. Paul Sieving, director of the National Eye Institute (NEI) of the National Institutes of Health. “These conditions were once untreatable, robbing people of their vision, mobility, and independence. Thankfully, in the last decade, medical researchers have developed highly effective, sight-saving treatments. However, these treatments are

only effective if the disease is diagnosed before it causes vision loss. Since there are often no warning signs, regular dilated eye exams are important to early detection and treatment.”

Talking to your family members about their eye health history is also important, as many eye diseases and conditions tend to run in families. Make sure you pass on your history to the next generation so they can take care of their vision, too. And, tell your eye care professional if anyone in your family has an eye disease or condition.

Other simple steps to keep your vision at its best include the following:

- Make healthy food choices—A variety of vegetables, especially dark leafy greens such as spinach, kale, or collard greens, should be an important part of your diet. Researchers have found that people with diets that contain higher levels of vitamins C and E, zinc, and omega-3 fatty acids (found in salmon, tuna, and halibut) are less likely to develop AMD.
- Quit smoking or never start—Tobacco smoking has been linked to an increased risk of AMD, cataract, and optic nerve damage, all of which can lead to vision loss.
- Wear eye protection—If you play sports or even work on home projects, it is critical to wear appropriate eye protection to prevent eye injuries. It’s also important to wear sunglasses with 99 to 100 percent UV-A/UV-B protection.

For more information about eye health and tips for finding an eye care professional or organizations that provide financial assistance for eye care, visit <http://www.nei.nih.gov/healthyeyes>.

