

Healthy Vision: Make It Last a Lifetime



Vision plays an important part in our lives. It enables us to care for our families. We also use our sight to watch our families and our communities grow, to perform our day-to-day activities, and to get around. It is important to make sure your vision is healthy so it can last a lifetime. And that takes wise choices.

Research studies have found that diabetes is common among American Indians and Alaska Natives, and has increased substantially over the past two decades. Because American Indians and Alaska Natives have a higher risk of getting diabetes, they also have a higher risk of getting eye problems resulting from diabetes, such as diabetic eye disease. Diabetic eye disease is a group of eye problems that includes diabetic retinopathy, the most common eye disease in people with diabetes.

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. 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.”

Your past is just as important as your future. Many eye diseases and conditions are hereditary and knowing your family history can help to determine if you are at higher risk. Make sure you pass on your history to the next generation so they can take care of their eyes, 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 age-related macular degeneration.
- 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.

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>.

