

5/23/06

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“Will I pass my vision test when I renew my license?”

By Dr. Kevin Skelsey

As an ophthalmologist at Silverstein Eye Centers I commonly discuss driving issues with many of my patients. Of course, the most common question is; “Will I pass my vision test when I renew my license?” As a basic rule, vision must be 20/40 or better, with or without correction, to have a license without restrictions. Unfortunately, for many people this goal becomes harder to reach as they age for a variety of reasons.

As the population ages, we are seeing increasing numbers of people with diseases such as macular degeneration. This disease is thought to result from a combination of genetics and environmental factors, such as oxidative stress, that eventually lead to failure of the photoreceptors in the central portion of the retina. The end result is a blurring of the central vision. This often causes people to lose the ability to read street signs or see subtleties in the road ahead. The peripheral vision is preserved, but very often they cannot meet “driving requirements”. While there is no cure for macular degeneration, studies are now showing that the use of antioxidants can slow its development.

A far less evident culprit is glaucoma. Glaucoma slowly steals peripheral vision over the course of years, often preserving central acuity until late in the disease. Many people with glaucoma continue to pass their driver’s screening tests because they can read the lines correctly. However, as glaucoma progresses, these drivers will continually develop larger and larger “blind spots”. This can lead to delayed reaction times if another car is coming from the side or a child is running into the street from the side. A person with advanced glaucoma may not become aware of these dangerous situations until it is too late to react. Luckily, if glaucoma is caught early, it can be treated and its progression slowed considerably such that it may not have a functional impact during a person’s life.

Fortunately, the most common reason for difficulties with driving is cataract. As cataracts slowly form with age, they begin to cause haze and loss of contrast. They can also cause blurring and glare. Almost daily I will speak with someone who has recently failed their driving test or given up driving at night. Very often they just don’t feel comfortable behind the

wheel anymore. Typically this is from glare induced by oncoming headlights which causes their vision to blur significantly. Cataracts decrease vision by scattering light and this is exacerbated by the point sources of light with nighttime driving. Again, reaction times diminish as people hesitate, trying to study the blurred images. When symptoms are significant enough, most people choose to undergo surgery and replace the cloudy lens with a new clear lens during a safe outpatient procedure. This can literally free people, restoring their independence by giving them options for nighttime driving again. At Silverstein Eye Centers we are dedicated to providing people with their best vision and keeping them as happy and independent as possible despite their chronological age.

Dr. Kevin Skelsey is an ophthalmologist at Silverstein Eye Centers. For interviews with Dr. Skelsey, please contact Mary Helber-Jamboretz at (816) 415-3777.