

Silverstein Eye Centers Helps Prevent Vision Loss

The three main causes of vision loss can be more effectively treated if caught early, even before symptoms are noticed. The American Academy of Ophthalmology recommends eye exams every 1-2 years after age 65. Patients should be screened for age-related macular degeneration (AMD), glaucoma and cataracts before vision loss occurs.

Macular degeneration is characterized by a loss of central vision and can cause irreversible blindness. There are two stages of AMD, the earlier “dry” form which progresses slowly and the “wet” form that is more severe. Early symptoms include blurred vision, blind spots and distorted vision. The progression of early “dry” AMD can be delayed with diet and lifestyle changes. Most importantly, smoking cessation will slow the progression of AMD. Other recommendations include use of sunglasses when outdoors, a diet high in antioxidants and low in saturated fats, and monitoring for a more severe form of AMD. Patients with moderate to severe “dry” AMD may benefit from high doses of vitamin A, C, E, zinc, copper, and omega-3 fatty acids. An eye-care provider can recommend an appropriate combination and dose of these supplements.

Approximately 10% of patients develop the “wet” stage of AMD where abnormal blood vessels grow under the retina and leak fluid and blood, damaging vision more rapidly and severely. However, if diagnosed in a timely manner, injections of medicines that inhibit the growth of abnormal blood vessels can improve vision in up to 40% of patients and stabilize vision in up to 90% of patients. The likelihood of success with these new treatments depends on at-home monitoring and rapid evaluation of vision changes.

Glaucoma is characterized by a loss of peripheral vision and can lead to irreversible blindness. In most cases, glaucoma, the “sneak thief of sight,” is completely asymptomatic until end-stage damage occurs. There are approximately one million undiagnosed glaucoma cases in the U.S. In a recent glaucoma screening involving the Hispanic community in Los Angeles, 75% of the identified glaucoma cases were previously undiagnosed. When glaucoma is diagnosed early, treatment can slow and even stop its progression.

Risk factors for glaucoma include age, race, elevated eye pressure, and abnormal optic nerve appearance. In particular, African Americans and Hispanics over age 60 are four times more likely to develop glaucoma than Caucasians. African Americans age 40-60 are 15 times more likely than Caucasians age 40-60 to develop vision loss from glaucoma. For these reasons, African Americans should have yearly screening for glaucoma starting at age 40 and everyone should be screened after age 60.

Cataracts are the most common cause of blindness worldwide, due to inadequate access to healthcare. In the US cataracts are the third-leading cause of blindness in patients over 65. Early symptoms of cataracts include blurred vision, loss of color contrast, haloes around lights, and glare. Typically, when symptoms significantly interfere with daily activities, cataract surgery is recommended. Significant advances in surgical technology have eliminated most risks associated with cataract surgery. In addition, new lens implant technology allows patients to decrease their dependence on glasses, both for distant and near vision. Ask your ophthalmologist for more information regarding the exciting advances in cataract surgery.

Screening for eye disease is important to maximize the chances of maintaining good vision in later life. The progression of AMD can be delayed with lifestyle changes and regular monitoring. Patients with glaucoma benefit from early diagnosis to prevent permanent vision loss. Patients with cataracts can take advantage of modern surgical technology for improved vision. If you are over 65 and have not seen an eye-care professional in the past 1-2 years, make your appointment now. Call Silverstein Eye Centers at 816-358-3600.