

Common Eye Problems and Diseases



Some eye problems do not threaten your eyesight. Others are more serious diseases and can lead to blindness.

Common Eye Problems

The following common eye complaints can be treated easily. Sometimes they can be signs of more serious problems.

Presbyopia (prez-bee-OH-pee-uh) is a slow loss of ability to see close objects or small print. It is a normal process that happens as you get older. Holding the newspaper at arm's length is a sign of presbyopia. You might also get headaches or tired eyes when you read or do other close work. Reading glasses usually fix the problem.

Floaters are tiny specks or "cobwebs" that seem to float across your eyes. You might notice them in well-lit rooms or outdoors on a bright day. Floaters can be a normal part of aging. Sometimes they are a sign of a more serious eye problem such as retinal detachment. If you see many new floaters and/or flashes of light see your eye care professional right away. This is considered a medical emergency.

Tearing (or having too many tears) can come from being sensitive to light, wind, or temperature changes. Protecting your eyes, by wearing sunglasses for example, may solve the problem. Sometimes, tearing may mean a more serious eye problem, such as an infection or a blocked tear duct. Your eye care professional can treat both of these conditions.

Eyelid problems can come from different diseases or conditions. Common eyelid problems include red and swollen eyelids, itching, tearing, being sensitive to light, and crusting of eyelashes during sleep. This condition is called blepharitis (ble-fa-RI-tis) and may be treated with warm compresses. Other less common eyelid problems, such as swelling or growths, can be treated with medicine or surgery.

Eye Diseases and Disorders

The following eye problems can lead to vision loss and blindness. Often they have few or no symptoms. Having regular eye exams is the best way to protect yourself. If your eye care professional finds a problem early there are things you can do to keep your eyesight.

Cataracts are cloudy areas in the eye's lens causing loss of eyesight. Cataracts often form slowly without any symptoms. Some stay small and don't change eyesight very much. Others may become large or dense and harm vision. Cataract surgery can help. Your eye care professional can watch for changes in your cataract over time to see if you need surgery. Cataract surgery is very safe. It is one of the most common surgeries done in the United States.

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Common Eye Diseases and Conditions

Corneal diseases and conditions can cause redness, watery eyes, pain, lower vision, or a halo effect. The cornea is the clear, dome-shaped "window" at the front of the eye. Disease, infection, injury, and other things can hurt the cornea. Some corneal conditions are more common in older people. Treatments for corneal problems can be simple. You may just need to change your eyeglass prescription and use eye drops. In severe cases, corneal transplantation is the treatment. It generally works well and is safe.

Dry eye happens when tear glands don't work well. You may feel itching, burning, or have some vision loss. Dry eye is more common as people get older, especially among women. Your eye care professional may tell you to use a home humidifier, or special eye drops (artificial tears), or ointments to treat dry eye. In serious cases special contact lenses or surgery may help.

Glaucoma comes from too much fluid pressure inside the eye. Over time, the pressure can hurt the optic nerve. This leads to vision loss and blindness. Most people with glaucoma have no early symptoms or pain from the extra pressure. You can protect yourself by having regular eye exams through dilated pupils. Treatment may be prescription eye drops, medicines that you take by mouth, laser treatment, or surgery.

Retinal disorders are a leading cause of blindness in the United States. The retina is a thin tissue that lines the back of the eye and sends light signals to the brain. Retinal disorders that affect aging eyes include:

Age-related macular degeneration (AMD). AMD affects the part of the retina (the macula) that gives you sharp central vision. Over time, AMD can ruin the sharp vision needed to see objects clearly and to do common tasks like driving and reading. In some cases, AMD can be treated with lasers. Photodynamic therapy uses a drug and strong light to slow the progress of AMD. Another treatment uses injections. Ask your eye care professional if you have signs of AMD. Also ask if you should be taking special dietary supplements that may lower your chances of its getting worse.

Diabetic retinopathy. This is a problem that may appear if you have diabetes. It happens when small blood vessels stop feeding the retina as they should. It develops slowly and there are no early warning signs. Laser surgery and a treatment called vitrectomy can help. Studies show that keeping blood sugar under control can prevent diabetic retinopathy or slow its progress. If you have diabetes be sure to have an eye exam through dilated pupils at least once a year.

Retinal detachment. This is when the retina separates from the back of the eye. When this happens, you may see more floaters or light flashes in your eye, either all at once or over time. Or it may seem as though there is a curtain in front of your eyes. If you have any of these symptoms, see your eye care professional at once. This is a medical emergency. With surgery or laser treatment, doctors often can bring back all or part of your eyesight.

From: <http://www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation/Publications/eyes.htm>

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