

Good health for your eyes

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We take good eyesight for granted - until something goes wrong with it. Yet many problems affecting vision can be prevented. We all know the importance of shielding our skin from sun, for instance, but not everyone realises that sunlight can also contribute to eye problems including cataracts and pterygiums - small growths on the white part of the eye which begin as a raised red area and can eventually affect vision, if they spread to the coloured part of the eye. Wearing a hat and well fitting sun-glasses, especially "wraparound" glasses for extra protection, help prevent sun damage, and are particularly important for outdoor workers

Is poor vision a normal part of ageing? Although it's true that most people need glasses when they get older, many vision problems can be prevented or treated. But according to Sydney Eye Hospital, many older people don't get help - they may think their eyesight problems are either due to age and can't be helped, or aren't important enough to merit seeing a doctor. But anyone with vision problems should see an eye doctor (ophthalmologist) or an optometrist.

What about eye problems in children? Signs that a child may have a problem include: if they squint or frown excessively, keep rubbing their eyes or close or cover one eye when looking at an object; if they sit too close to the television or hold books close to their eyes; if they don't do as well as they should at school, are disruptive in class or avoid games which need distance vision. Two to four per cent of children have "lazy eye" or amblyopia, a condition where the vision is reduced in one eye. Sometimes a "lazy eye" is obvious - when the child focuses on an object, one eye looks in a different direction. But in some children the eyes look normal and the problem goes unnoticed. This is why all children need their

eyes checked before starting school. Children don't grow out of a "lazy eye" - they need to see an ophthalmologist promptly.

How often should you have your eyes checked? Sydney Eye Hospital recommends all adults have their eyes checked every two years to detect problems before they become serious. This is especially important for anyone with diabetes or anyone with a family history of glaucoma. A leading cause of blindness in Australia, glaucoma may have no obvious symptoms until it's too late - by the time a person realises something is wrong some vision may have already been lost. But if glaucoma is found and treated early, most people can keep their sight for the rest of their lives.

About three per cent of people over 40 have glaucoma, but it also affects young adults and children too. People with diabetes or a family history of glaucoma, or people who have migraine or have had a previous eye injury have a higher risk of the disease. Ask your GP to refer you to an ophthalmologist or optometrist for a check up - the cost of this is partly refundable through Medicare.

What causes spots before the eyes? These are called "floaters" - they can best be seen by looking up at a plain white ceiling or clear blue sky when they can look like insects, spider webs or veils. Although they're a result of ageing and usually harmless, they can sometimes be a sign of something more serious - it's best to get it checked just in case. But if you see new spots in front of your eyes, or suddenly see flashing lights or have partial loss of vision this is a warning your eyes may be at risk - see a doctor promptly. Your GP can refer you to an eye specialist.

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.