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There's a very good reason why adults should think about having regular eye checks. It's a disease called glaucoma which usually destroys eyesight so slowly and painlessly that people with the condition may not realise anything is wrong until much of their vision is lost. Glaucoma can't be cured. But early detection with regular eye tests every two years for people over 40 (or over 35 if you have a higher risk of the disease) means glaucoma can be easily controlled with as little damage to vision as possible. If treated early, most people with glaucoma can keep their sight for the rest of their lives.

Glaucoma is a leading cause of blindness in Australia. It is as common as diabetes and although it's more likely to affect people over 40, it can happen at any age and occasionally occurs in children and young adults too. People who have a higher risk of the disease include anyone with a family history of glaucoma. If you have a parent or a grandparent with a vision problem, it's important to find out what the cause is, just in case it's glaucoma.

Other risk factors include having diabetes or high blood pressure, or suffering from migraine, being shortsighted, having had a previous eye injury or using cortisone drugs (steroids) either now or in the past.

What causes glaucoma? It happens when a very important part of the eye called the optic nerve becomes damaged - a common cause is increased pressure from a build-up of fluid inside the eye. This pressure destroys the optic nerve. But this damage is very gradual and because it starts by affecting the side vision, the effects often go unnoticed until quite a lot of vision has been lost.

How is glaucoma treated? Although there's no cure for the disease, it can usually be controlled with treatment which prevents, or at least slows down, any further loss of sight. However it doesn't improve eyesight. Treatments include:

- Eye drops -these are the most common treatment - but they must be used regularly to be effective. Sometimes pills are prescribed too.
- Laser treatment. A laser is a very concentrated beam of light which is used in many different kinds of medical treatment. With glaucoma, a laser can be used to relieve the pressure caused by fluid building up in the eye. This is done in cases where eye drops alone aren't enough to stop vision deteriorating.
- Surgery. When other treatments fail to control the pressure in the eye, surgery may relieve it.

To arrange an eye test, ask your doctor to refer you to an ophthalmologist. You can also have an eye test done by an optometrist, and no doctor's referral is necessary.

For more information, including pamphlets in English, Spanish, Arabic, Vietnamese, Italian and Chinese, contact Glaucoma Australia on 1902 261 071. Glaucoma Australia offers counselling to people with the disease, and holds regular support group meetings.

If you need help making phone calls in English, ring the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on 131 450.

You can find more health information in your language on the Multicultural Communication website at

www.mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au