

Aging and Your Eyes

As you age, it is normal to notice changes in your vision. A few common changes for older adults include:

- Losing the ability to see up close
- Having trouble distinguishing colors, such as blue from black
- Needing more time to adjust to changing levels of light

These problems are often easily corrected. Glasses, contact lenses, and improved lighting may help and enable you to maintain your lifestyle and independence.

Your risk for some eye diseases and conditions increases as you grow older, and some eye changes are more serious. Keep your eyes as healthy as possible by getting regular eye exams so any problems can be spotted early.

What Can You Do To Protect Your Vision?

Have your eyes checked regularly by an eye care professional — either an ophthalmologist or optometrist. Finding and treating any problems early can help protect your vision and prevent vision loss. Make a list of your questions and concerns to share with the doctor. Tell them which medications you are taking. Some can affect your eyes.

Normal changes in the aging eye usually do not harm your vision. However, sometimes they can be signs of a more serious problem. For example, your eyes may leak tears. This can happen with light sensitivity, wind, or temperature changes. Sunglasses and eye drops may help. Sometimes, leaking tears may be a symptom of dry eye or a sign of an infection or blocked tear ducts. Your eye care professional can treat these problems.

Many people don't notice any signs or symptoms in the early stages of eye diseases. A dilated eye exam performed by an eye care professional is the only way to find some common eye diseases while they're easier to treat — and before they cause vision loss. Everyone over age 50 should have a dilated eye

Tips for Healthy Eyes at Any Age

There are things you can do to take good care of your eyes and help keep them healthy as you age:

Protect your eyes from sunlight by wearing sunglasses that block ultraviolet (UV) radiation and a hat with a wide brim when you are outside.

- Stop smoking.
- Make smart food choices.
- Be physically active and maintain a healthy weight.
- Maintain normal blood pressure.
- Manage diabetes (if you have it).
- If you spend a lot of time at the computer or focused on one thing, take a break every 20 minutes to look about 20 feet away for 20 seconds to prevent eye strain.

exam every year or as recommended by your eye care professional, even if you have good vision and don't wear contacts or glasses. After age 60, you should get a dilated eye exam every year or two. Most people with diabetes or high blood pressure need to get a dilated exam at least once a year.

During this exam, the eye care professional will put drops in your eyes to widen (dilate) your pupils so that he or she can better see inside each eye. Your vision may be blurry after the exam, and your eyes may be more

sensitive to light. This only lasts a few hours. Make plans for someone else to drive you home.

If you wear glasses or contact lenses, get your prescription checked, too. Even small changes in sight can increase your risk for falls and injuries. It's important to use the proper prescription glasses or contact lenses.

See your primary health care provider regularly to check for diseases like diabetes and high blood pressure. These diseases can cause eye problems if not controlled or treated.

Eye Diseases and Conditions

The following eye problems can lead to vision loss and blindness in older adults. These problems may have few or no early symptoms. Regular eye exams are your best protection. If your eye care professional finds a problem early, often there are things you can do to protect your vision.

■ **Age-related macular degeneration (AMD)** can harm the sharp, central vision needed to see objects clearly and to do common things like driving and reading. Your eye care professional will ask about your family history and look for signs of AMD during a dilated eye exam. Treatments are available, and special dietary supplements may help lower your chance of it getting worse.

■ **Diabetic retinopathy** may occur if you have diabetes. It develops slowly, often with no early warning signs. If you have diabetes, be sure to have a dilated eye exam at least once a year. Keeping your blood sugar, blood pressure, and cholesterol under control can prevent diabetic retinopathy or slow its progress in early stages. Laser surgery in later stages can sometimes prevent it from getting worse.

■ **Cataracts** are cloudy areas in the eye's lens that cause blurred or hazy vision. Some cataracts stay small and don't change your eyesight much. Others become large and reduce vision. Cataract surgery can restore good vision and is a safe and common treatment. If you have a cataract, your eye care professional will watch for changes over time to see if you would benefit from surgery.

■ **Glaucoma** is usually caused by too much fluid pressure inside the eye. If not treated, it can lead to vision loss and blindness. People with glaucoma often have no early symptoms or pain. You can help protect yourself by having dilated eye exams yearly. Glaucoma can be treated with prescription eye drops, lasers, or surgery.

■ **Dry eye** occurs when tear glands don't work well. You may feel stinging or burning, a sandy feeling as if something is in the eye, or other discomfort. Dry eye is common as people get older, especially for women. Your eye care professional may tell you to use a home humidifier or air purifier, special eye drops (artificial tears), or ointments to treat dry eye. For more severe cases, treatment options might include prescription medication, tear duct plugs, or surgery.

Signs of an Eye Emergency

See an eye care professional right away if you:

- Suddenly cannot see or everything looks blurry
- See many new floaters (tiny specks or "cobwebs" that seem to float across your vision) and/or flashes of light
- Have eye pain
- Experience double vision
- Have redness or swelling of your eye or eyelid

What Is Low Vision?

Low vision means you cannot fix your eyesight with glasses, contact lenses, medication, or surgery. Low vision affects some people as they age. You may have low vision if you:

- Can't see well enough to do everyday tasks like reading or cooking
- Have difficulty recognizing the faces of your friends or family
- Have trouble reading street signs
- Find that lights don't seem as bright

If you have any of these problems, ask your eye care professional to test you for low vision.

Vision rehabilitation programs and special aids, such as a magnifying device, can help you adapt to vision loss and make the most of your remaining sight. Remember to ask your eye doctor if it is safe for you to drive with your vision. If you have to stop driving, organizations in your area may be able to arrange rides for you, or public transportation may be available.

Other tips that may help:

- Brighten the lighting in your room.
- Write with bold, black felt-tip markers.
- Use paper with bold lines to help you write in a straight line.
- Put colored tape on the edge of any stairs in your home to help you see them and help prevent you from falling.
- Install dark-colored light switches and electrical outlets so that you can see them easily against light-colored walls.
- Use motion lights that turn on when you enter a room. These may help you avoid accidents caused by poor lighting.
- Use clocks with large numbers and phones with large screens; put large-print labels on the microwave and stove.

For More Information About Eye Problems

National Eye Institute

301-496-5248

2020@nei.nih.gov

www.nei.nih.gov

National Library of Medicine

MedlinePlus

www.medlineplus.gov

VisionAware

American Printing House for the Blind

800-232-5463

connectcenter@aph.org

https://visionaware.org

For more information on health and aging, contact:

**National Institute on Aging
Information Center**

800-222-2225

800-222-4225 (TTY)

niaic@nia.nih.gov

www.nia.nih.gov

Visit www.nia.nih.gov/health to find more health and aging information from NIA and subscribe to email alerts. Visit <https://order.nia.nih.gov> to order free print publications.



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