

Five Steps to Saving Your Sight

By Donna Dreiske, Executive Director, Illinois Society for the Prevention of Blindness

Losing one's sight is the most feared disability and yet we don't always understand the lifestyle choices we make that can impact our vision health. The aging process leaves us increasingly vulnerable to eye diseases and disorders. There are four major eye disorders generally related to aging – Age-related Macular Degeneration (AMD), Cataracts, Diabetic Retinopathy and Glaucoma. Vision loss, however, is not inevitable. With proper care and attention 80% of vision loss can be avoided.

More than 3.4 million Illinois residents are impacted with some form of vision loss, eye disease or blindness. Don't join this growing statistic. Protect your eyesight by taking these beneficial steps:

Avoid sun exposure. Growing evidence shows that sun exposure contributes to aging eye disorders such as AMD, Cataracts and Glaucoma. Make sure your sunglasses have 100% UV protection as poor quality lenses simply dilate the eyes and allow more UV rays to penetrate. (Remember this when buying cute sunglasses for the grandkids too.) A hat with a brim also keeps out overhead rays.

Quit smoking. If there weren't enough reasons to quit, add protecting your vision to the list. Increasingly, evidence shows a strong connection between smoking and the development of Cataracts, AMD and other diseases of the eye. Smoke is not only an irritant but smoking increases oxidant stress while lowering antioxidant levels in the blood.

Know your risk factors. Heredity and ethnicity are two of the strongest risk factors for aging eye diseases. If your father had AMD you are at a higher risk for the disease yourself. If you are a person of color, you are at higher risk for Glaucoma. If you are a diabetic, you obviously are at high risk for Diabetic Retinopathy.

Adapt a healthy lifestyle. The eye, just as the rest of the body, benefits from good nutrition. Fresh fruits and vegetables, particularly those with increased antioxidants are particularly beneficial. Good cardio-vascular health means adequate blood flow to the eyes. A balanced diet deters other health conditions that can have a secondary affect on vision such as diabetes.

See your eye doctor. Every adult, particularly those over the age of 40, should have a dilated eye exam every two years but if you have any risk factors an eye exam is recommended every year. The onset of aging eye diseases is often subtle and without symptoms. Significant vision loss can occur before it is realized. Most aging eye diseases are treatable with early detection. Even the progression of an eye disease can be dramatically slowed with proper care. See the doctor immediately if you notice changes in your vision.

The mission of the Illinois Society for the Prevention of Blindness is to reduce the preventable causes of blindness and to preserve sight. Founded in 1916, ISPB promotes lifelong vision health through education, research and programs.

Please visit our website at www.EyeHealthIllinois.org