

The Importance of Routine Eye Examinations

We often seek medical attention if our eyes hurt, or turn red, or if our vision becomes blurry. But we don't often get our eyes examined regularly if we are not having any problems with them. Routine eye examinations are important even if our eyes and vision are fine—because many blinding eye diseases have few or no warning signs until they have taken away some or all of our vision.

The most common cause of blindness in the United States is diabetic eye disease. In the early stages, when it is most easily treated, diabetic eye disease has no symptoms. The only way for a diabetic to know if he or she has diabetic eye disease is to get routine eye examinations at least once a year.

The second most common cause of blindness in the US is glaucoma. Glaucoma is called the silent thief of sight because it has no symptoms at all until the disease is very advanced. And in glaucoma, once vision is lost, it can never be regained, so finding it in the advanced stage is often too late to save the sight. Glaucoma is common in older adults, but can occur at any age. The only way to know if you have glaucoma is to have a comprehensive eye examination on a regular basis.

The most common cause of blindness among Americans over age 50 is age-related macular degeneration. In the early stages of macular degeneration, treatments can be used to prevent the disease from getting worse. But the early stages of macular degeneration have no symptoms. The only way to know if you have early macular degeneration—and to start treatment to prevent it from getting worse—is to

have routine eye examinations even if your eyes seem fine.

These are just a few of the eye diseases that can blind you without your even knowing you have them. To be safe, you should have a thorough eye examination on a regular basis to be sure your eyes are as healthy as you think they are. Finding eye diseases as early as possible gives you the best chance of saving your sight.

How often should you have a routine eye examination? Children should have their first examination, including a measurement of vision, before they begin kindergarten. Their vision should be measured at least every few years to make sure that sight is developing normally. It is a good idea for teens to have a full eye examination before

beginning to drive, to make sure they will be safe behind the wheel. After that, adults should consider having an eye exam every year or two beginning at age 40, and at least once a year after age 50 when the blinding diseases listed above become more common.

There are a few exceptions to these guidelines. People with diabetes should have an eye examination every year starting when they are diagnosed with diabetes, no matter how old they are. And people who have relatives with eye diseases, such as glaucoma or macular degeneration, should have examinations once a year beginning as soon as age 30.



Photo Credit: National Eye Institute, National Institutes of Health

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