Healthy Eyes Bulletin
Healthy Vision: Make It Last a Lifetime

Tips for Healthy Vision

Your eyes are an important part of your health. There are many things you can do to keep them healthy and make sure you are seeing your best. Follow these simple steps for maintaining healthy vision well into your golden years.

Have a comprehensive dilated eye exam. You might think your vision is fine or that your eyes are healthy, but visiting your eye care professional for a comprehensive dilated eye exam is the only way to really be sure. When it comes to common vision problems, some people don't realize they could see better with glasses or contact lenses. In addition, many common eye diseases such as diabetic eye disease (glaucoma, cataract, and diabetic retinopathy) and age-related macular degeneration often have no warning signs. A dilated eye exam is the only way to detect these diseases in their early stages.

During a comprehensive dilated eye exam, your eye care professional places drops in your eyes to dilate, or widen, the pupil to allow more light to enter the eye the same way an open door lets more light into a dark room. This procedure enables your eye care professional to get a good look at the back of the eyes and examine them for any signs of damage or disease. Your eye care professional is the only one who can determine if your eyes are healthy and if you are seeing your best.

Know your family's eye health history. Talk to your family members about their eye health history. It's important to know if anyone has been diagnosed with a disease or condition, as many are hereditary. This information will help you determine if you are at higher risk for developing an eye disease or condition.

Eat right to protect your sight. You've heard carrots are good for your eyes. But eating a diet rich in fruits and vegetables, particularly dark leafy greens such as spinach, kale, or collard greens, is important for keeping your eyes healthy, too.[1] Research has also shown there are eye health benefits from eating fish high in omega-3 fatty acids, such as salmon, tuna, and halibut.

Maintain a healthy weight. Being overweight or obese increases your risk of developing diabetes and other systemic conditions, which can have vision-threatening complications, such as diabetic eye disease. If you are having trouble maintaining a healthy weight, talk to your doctor.

Wear protective eyewear. Wear protective eyewear when playing sports or doing activities around the home. Protective eyewear includes safety glasses and goggles, safety shields, and eye guards specially designed to provide the correct protection for a certain activity. Most protective eyewear lenses are made of polycarbonate, which is 10 times stronger than other plastics. Many eye care professionals sell protective eyewear, as do some sporting goods stores.

Quit smoking or never start. Smoking is as bad for your eyes as it is for the rest of your body. Research has linked smoking to an increased risk of developing age-related macular degeneration, cataract, and optic nerve damage, all of which can lead to blindness.[2,3]

Be cool and wear your shades. Sunglasses are a great fashion accessory, but their most important job is to protect your eyes from ultraviolet rays. When purchasing sunglasses, look for ones that block out 99 to 100 percent of both UV-A and UV-B radiation.

Give your eyes a rest. If you spend a lot of time at the computer or focusing on any one thing, you sometimes forget to blink and your eyes can get fatigued. Try the 20-20-20 rule: Every 20 minutes, look away about 20 feet in front of you for 20 seconds. This can help reduce eye strain.

Clean your hands and your contact lenses—properly. To avoid the risk of infection, always wash your hands thoroughly before putting in or taking out your contact lenses. Make sure to disinfect contact lenses as instructed and replace them as appropriate.

Practice workplace eye safety. Employers are required to provide a safe work environment. When protective eyewear is required as a part of your job, make a habit of wearing the appropriate type at all times and encourage your coworkers to do the same.

For more information about eye health, visit **http://www.nei.nih.gov/healthyeyes**.

1 Age-Related Eye Disease Study Research Group. (2007). The relationship of dietary carotenoid with vitamin A, E, and C intake with age-related macular degeneration in a case-control study. *Archives of Ophthalmology*, *125*(9), 1225–1232.

2 Age-Related Eye Disease Study Research Group. (2001). Risk factors associated with age-related nuclear and cortical cataract. *Ophthalmology*, *108*(8), 1400–1408.

3 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General. (2004). The health consequences of smoking: A report of the Surgeon General. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Tips for Finding an Eye Care Professional

Sometimes it can be difficult to choose a healthcare professional. It's important to find someone you have good communication with, especially when it comes to your eye health. Here are a few tips for finding a local professional to provide your eye care:

- Ask family members and friends about eye care professionals they use.
- Ask your family doctor for the name of a local eye care professional.
- Call the department of ophthalmology or optometry at a nearby hospital or university medical center.
- Contact a state or county association of ophthalmologists or optometrists. These groups, usually called academies or societies, may have lists of eye care professionals with specific information on specialty and experience.
- Contact your insurance company or health plan to learn whether it has a list of eye care professionals that are covered under your plan.
- Visit a local bookstore or library for journals and books about selecting a physician and medical treatment. A library reference specialist can help you identify books on finding healthcare professionals.

Visit **http://www.nei.nih.gov/healthyeyes/findprofessional.asp** for additional recommendations and resources.
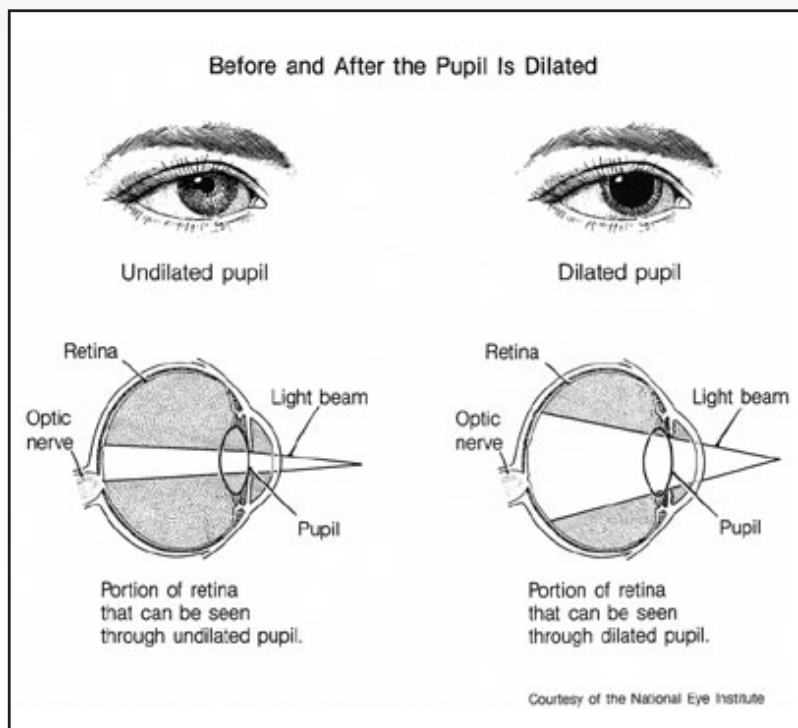
Healthy Vision Starts With a Dilated Eye Exam

Getting a comprehensive dilated eye exam is one of the best things you can do to keep your eyes healthy. In this painless procedure, an eye care professional examines your eyes to look for common vision problems and eye diseases, many of which have no early warning signs.

Different from the basic eye exam you have for glasses or contact lenses, comprehensive dilated eye exams can help protect your sight by making sure you are seeing your best and detecting eye diseases in their early stages, before vision loss has occurred.

A comprehensive dilated eye exam includes the following:

- **Dilation**—Drops are placed in your eyes to dilate, or widen, the pupils. Your eye care professional uses a special magnifying lens to examine your retina to look for signs of damage and other eye problems, such as diabetic retinopathy or age-related macular degeneration. A dilated eye exam also allows your eye care professional to check for damage to the optic nerve that occurs when a person has glaucoma. After the examination, your close-up vision may remain blurred for several hours.

- **Tonometry**—This test helps to detect glaucoma by measuring eye pressure. Your eye care professional may direct a quick puff of air onto the eye, or gently apply a pressure-sensitive tip near or against the eye. Numbing drops may be applied to your eye for this test. Elevated pressure is a possible sign of glaucoma.

- **Visual field test**—This test measures your side (peripheral) vision. It helps your eye care professional find out if you have lost side vision, a sign of glaucoma.

- **Visual acuity test**—This eye chart test measures how well you see at various distances.

Before and After the Pupil Is Dilated

Undilated pupil

Dilated pupil

Retina
Optic nerve
Light beam
Pupil
Portion of retina that can be seen through undilated pupil.

Retina
Optic nerve
Light beam
Pupil
Portion of retina that can be seen through dilated pupil.

Courtesy of the National Eye Institute

To learn more about comprehensive dilated eye exams, common vision problems, and eye disease, visit **http://www.nei.nih.gov/healthyeyes/eyeexam.asp**.

Financial Assistance for Eye Care

Many state and national programs provide financial assistance to people in need of eye care and corrective eyewear. You may want to contact the following organizations if you need help covering the cost of an eye exam and glasses or contact lenses.

EyeCare America—EyeCare America provides access to eye care for the medically underserved and those at increased risk for eye disease through a corps of 7,000 volunteer ophthalmologists dedicated to serving their communities. Founded in 1985, EyeCare America is the public service program of the Foundation of the American Academy of Ophthalmology. For more information, contact the EyeCare Program helpline toll-free at 1–800–222–EYES (3937), 24 hours a day, seven days a week, or visit **http://www.eyecareamerica.org**.

Lions Clubs International Foundation—Lions Clubs International is a service organization whose local club members are all volunteers. A local Lions club in or near your community may sponsor a program that may help you buy corrective eyewear or obtain eye health care. To find a Lions club near you, access the Club Locator at **http://www.lionsclubs.org/EN/find-a-club.php**.

VISION USA—Volunteers In Service In Our Nation (VISION USA) provides basic eye health and vision services, free of charge, to low-income, uninsured individuals and their families. Participating optometrists of the American Optometric Association have been donating their services to VISION USA since 1991. For more information, visit **http://www.aoa.org/visionusa.xml** or call 1–800–766–4466, 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., CST, Monday through Friday.

In addition to the programs above, you may also want to contact a social worker at a local hospital or other community agency. Social workers often are knowledgeable about community resources that can help people facing financial and medical problems.

For more information, please visit **http://www.nei.nih.gov/healthyeyes/financialaid.asp**.