

Types of Vision Loss

The 10 Most Common Eye Problems:

Your eyesight is one of your most valuable assets. Because maintaining the health of your eyes is so important, here are the Top 10 most common issues people experience with their eyes. If any of these apply to you, please see an ophthalmologist as soon as possible before the condition threatens your eyesight.

1. Cataracts

Characterized by a cloudy, milky white lens in the eye, most cataracts are age-related and more common in people over 50 (but can develop at any age). Cataracts can be the result of injury, UV exposure, or protein deterioration over time; this is what causes the eye's lens to cloud. If left untreated, cataracts can ultimately cause severe vision loss.

Treatment: Fortunately, cataracts are a common eye problem that can be treated through surgery. Whether surgery is needed depends on the degree of vision loss and whether it affects your quality of life and ability to function.

2. Keratoconus

Normally, the cornea (the clear outer lens of the eye) has a dome shape, like a ball. Sometimes, however, the collagen which holds the cornea in place becomes weak, causing the cornea to become cone shaped. This condition is called keratoconus. This can cause serious loss of vision if not treated early and quickly. Left untreated, many people will need a cornea transplant.

Treatment: Treatment usually starts with eyeglasses. Contact lenses, usually rigid gas permeable ones, may be recommended to strengthen the cornea and improve vision. In addition, cornea collagen crosslinking is often effective to help prevent progression, as well as intacs (implants placed under the surface of the cornea to reduce the cone shape and improve vision). A last resort is a cornea transplant.

3. Diabetic Retinopathy

Diabetic retinopathy occurs as a result of prolonged high blood sugar associated with types 1 and 2 diabetes and can cause blindness if left untreated. Too much blood sugar can alter the blood vessels in the back of the eye, preventing the retina from receiving the proper amount of nutrients it needs to maintain vision. Anyone with diabetes type 1 or type 2 is at risk of developing diabetic retinopathy. However, the type of diabetes a person has, how often their blood glucose fluctuates, how well they control their sugars, and how long they have had diabetes all affects his/her risk.

Treatment: In most cases, laser surgery can prevent significant vision loss associated with diabetic retinopathy. A procedure called laser photocoagulation can seal or destroy growing or leaking blood vessels in the retina.

4. Macular Degeneration

This leading cause of blindness is characterized by damage to the macula, the area of the retina that perceives light. Risk factors include: age, smoking, female gender and family history. Unfortunately, there is no known cure for macular degeneration. However, current treatments can slow the progression of the disease.

Treatment: Age-related macular degeneration treatments may prevent severe vision loss or slow the progression of the disease considerably. Several treatment options are available, including:

- Anti-angiogenic drugs. Injected into the eye, these medications block the development of new blood vessels and leakage from the abnormal vessels within the eye.
- Laser therapy. High-energy laser light can sometimes be used to destroy actively growing abnormal blood vessels.
- Photodynamic laser therapy. A two-step treatment in which a light-sensitive drug is used to damage abnormal blood vessels. A medication is injected into the bloodstream to be absorbed by the abnormal blood vessels in the eye. A cold laser is then shone into the eye to activate the drug, damaging the abnormal blood vessels.
- Vitamins C, E, beta-carotene, zinc and copper can decrease the risk of vision loss in certain patients with intermediate to advanced dry age-related macular degeneration.

5. Refractive Errors

According to the National Eye Institute, refractive errors are the most common cause of vision problems. Refraction in the eye occurs when light passes through the cornea and the lens. Errors can occur as a result of the length of the eyeball, changes in the shape of the cornea or natural aging of the lens. Nearsightedness, farsightedness and astigmatism are categorized by refractive errors.

Treatment: The most common forms of treatment are eyeglasses, contact lenses and surgery.

6. Glaucoma

Glaucoma is a condition that causes damage to the eye's optic nerve and worsens over time. Associated with a buildup of pressure inside the eye, glaucoma tends to be inherited and may not show up until later in life. The increased pressure, called intraocular pressure, can damage the optic nerve, which transmits images to the brain. If damage to the optic nerve from high eye pressure continues, glaucoma will cause permanent loss of vision. Because most people with glaucoma have no early symptoms or pain from this increased pressure, it is important to see your eye doctor regularly so that glaucoma can be diagnosed and treated before long-term visual loss occurs.

Treatment: Once detected, glaucoma can be treated with either surgery, lasers or eye drops.

7. Presbyopia

Presbyopia is the loss of the ability to clearly see close objects or small print. Part of the natural aging process of the eye, presbyopia is often confused with farsightedness but the two are not the same. Presbyopia occurs when the natural lens in the eye loses flexibility,

while farsightedness occurs as a result of the natural shape of the eyeball, which causes light rays to bend incorrectly once they have entered the eye.

Treatment: Treatment options include wearing corrective lenses, undergoing refractive surgery or getting lens implants.

8. Floaters

Common among people over 50, floaters are tiny spots or specks that float across the field of vision. Formed by a deposit of protein drifting about in the vitreous (the clear, jelly-like substance that fills the middle of the eye), floaters seem to drift in front of the eye but do not block vision. Usually benign, floaters sometimes can indicate a more serious eye problem such as retinal detachment, especially if they are accompanied by light flashes. If you notice a sudden change in the type or number of spots or flashes you see, visit your eye doctor as soon as possible.

9. Dry eyes

The condition known as “dry eyes” happens when tear glands cannot make enough tears or produce poor quality tears. Dry eyes can be uncomfortable, causing itching, burning and in rare cases, some loss of vision.

Treatment: Your eye doctor may suggest using a humidifier in your home, special eye drops that simulate real tears, or plugs placed in tear ducts to decrease tear drainage.

10. Tearing

If your eyes produce too many tears, this may indicate that your eyes are particularly sensitive to light, wind or temperature changes. Protecting your eyes by shielding them or wearing sunglasses can sometimes solve the problem. Tearing may also mean that you have a more serious problem, such as an eye infection or a blocked tear duct. Your eye doctor can treat or correct both conditions.

These common eye problems can be cured or at least slowed down if caught early by an eyecare professional. Seeing your eye doctor regularly is the best way you can ensure healthy vision for years to come. By William B. Dieck, MD, FAAO, an ophthalmologist and board-certified eye surgeon with Westchester Health.