

## **THE EYES HAVE IT: LIVING WELL WITH VISION LOSS**

Changes in vision are common in older adults. If you care for an older relative or spouse, chances are he or she suffers from poor eyesight. According to statistics from the National Eye Institute over 800,000 Americans over 60 suffer from low vision or blindness.

### **THE AGING EYE**

Age-related vision loss usually develops gradually and many older people aren't aware that they don't see as well as they used to. They may notice that colors aren't as bright, reading is more difficult – specially small print in newspapers or the telephone directories, and night vision is poor.

Common age-related vision disorders include:

- Cataracts are the major cause of vision loss in older adults and also one of the most easily treated. Cataracts are cloudy areas in the lens of the eye that gradually cause blurred or reduced vision. Cataracts are easily treated with surgical replacement of the clouded lens with a new artificial one. After the procedure most people are amazed at how much better their vision is.
- Age-related macular degeneration damages the eye's central vision and affects the ability to see objects clearly, drive or read. The condition develops gradually and most people find out that they have it during a routine eye exam. Although there is no cure for the disease, treatments are available to slow the disease process and improve vision.
- Glaucoma increases fluid pressure within the eye and causes damages to its nerves. Like macular degeneration this disease also has no symptoms and is not painful and is usually diagnosed during an eye checkup. Although it cannot be cured it can be treated with prescription eye drops or surgery.
- Diabetic retinopathy increases growth of abnormal new blood vessels that block the flow of blood to the retina. Like other eye diseases of later life it has no symptoms and cannot be cured. The condition can be treated with laser surgery can keep the condition from getting worse. Good diabetes care and managing blood sugar levels lower the risk of developing this disease.

Many of these conditions can be managed with medical treatments and lifestyle changes. Encourage your older relative to have an annual eye exam. Although cures may not be available for some eye diseases, treatments may be available that will improve your parent's vision substantially.

### **HOME SAFETY TIPS FOR PEOPLE WITH VISION LOSS**

Older adults with poor vision are more likely to fall than those with normal eyesight. Many eye disorders affect depth perception, peripheral vision, visual acuity,

and ability to see in the dark. Take a tour of your parent's house or apartment (or your house if he or she lives with you or spends a lot of time at your home) and make modifications to make it safer.

The most common causes of falls at home are especially dangerous for people with poor vision. For a safer home remove:

- Throw rugs
- Electrical cords
- Household clutter
- Unsteady furniture

Safety features to install:

- Nightlights throughout the house
- Telephones and clocks with large numbers
- Grab bars in bathrooms
- Strips of colored tape on the edges of steps (indoors and out) to make them easier to see
- Motion lights that turn on automatically when someone enters a room

## **LOW VISION AIDS MAKE LIFE EASY AND SAFE**

A variety of low vision products and services are available to help older adults with vision disorders live as independently as possible.

Useful low vision aides include:

- Magnifiers that allow people with low vision to use a computer, sew, knit, or read
- Large print dictionaries, cookbooks, globes and maps
- Calculators, clocks, radios and timers with large easy-to-see numbers
- Canes, walkers and other mobility aids to prevent falls
- Magnifying screens for TVs and computers
- Low vision playing cards, Bingo, and other board games
- "Talking" medication reminders and scales
- "Talking" or large-print home blood sugar meters to help people with diabetes see blood sugar test results clearly.
- Large print calendars and organizers.

These and other useful low vision tools are available at pharmacies, medical supply stores, or on the Internet. Your parent's ophthalmologist may recommend other devices.

Many libraries now have collections of large print or recorded books for people with low vision that include the latest mysteries, novels, and non-fiction books, along with classic novels and poetry. Visit the library with your older relative and help him or her choose reading materials.

## **EYE HEALTH – IT'S A FAMILY AFFAIR!**

Loss of vision can be overwhelming for your older relative. Thanks to improved treatments and assistive devices it's much easier for him or her to preserve as much of her vision as possible and continue to live safely and independently at home.

As a caregiver, encourage your parent to visit an ophthalmologist at least once a year for a complete eye examination to keep his eyes as healthy as possible. Work with your parent to make home and lifestyle changes that will keep her safe, comfortable and independent and preserve her remaining vision for as long as possible.

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