SIMPLE TIPS FOR HEALTHY EYES

As an African American, you are at higher risk for certain eye diseases that, if left untreated, can cause vision loss and even blindness. For this reason, it is important that you maintain healthy vision. The good news is that vision loss can often be prevented.

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 eyes 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 getting a comprehensive dilated eye exam from your eye care professional is the only way to be sure. In addition, many common eye diseases, such as glaucoma and diabetic eye disease, 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 pupils. This procedure allows more light to enter the eye, the same way an open door lets more light into a dark room. The eye care professional is then able to get a good look at the back of your eyes and examine them for any signs of damage or disease. Your eye care professional is the only one who can determine whether your eyes are healthy and you are seeing your best.

Know your family’s eye health history.

Talk with your family members about their eye health history. It’s important to know whether anyone has been diagnosed with a disease or condition, since many run in families. This will help determine whether 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. Research has also shown that 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 lead to vision loss, such as diabetic eye disease or glaucoma. If you are having trouble maintaining a healthy weight, talk with your doctor.

Wear protective eyewear.
When you play sports or do activities around the home, protect your eyes. Protective eyewear includes safety glasses and goggles, safety shields, and eye guards specially designed to provide the correct protection for a certain activity.

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.

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

TIPS FOR FINDING AN EYE CARE PROFESSIONAL
It’s important to find someone you have good communication with when it comes to your eye health. A few tips for finding a local professional to provide your eye care can be found here: www.nei.nih.gov/health/findprofessional.

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE FOR EYE CARE
Many state and national programs provide financial assistance to people in need of eye care and corrective eyewear. Visit www.nei.nih.gov/health/financialaid for organizations to contact if you need help in covering the cost of an eye exam and glasses or contact lenses.

For more information about eye health, visit www.nei.nih.gov/healthyeyes.
AFRICAN AMERICANS AND EYE HEALTH: FOCUS ON YOUR VISION

DIABETIC RETINOPATHY

Approximately 828,000 African Americans have diabetic retinopathy, and this number is expected to exceed 1 million by 2030. In addition, less than half of African Americans have heard of diabetic retinopathy.

What is it?
• Diabetic retinopathy occurs when the blood vessels in the eye are damaged by diabetes.

What causes it?
• It is caused when blood vessels inside the eye swell or leak fluid or when new, abnormal blood vessels grow within the eye.

What are the symptoms?
• There are usually no symptoms or pain in the early stages.

How can you focus on your vision?
• If you have diabetes, keep it under control and get a comprehensive dilated eye exam at least once a year.
• Don’t wait for symptoms to see an eye care professional.

For more information on diabetic retinopathy and tips on protecting your vision, visit www.nei.nih.gov/diabetes.

GLAUCOMA

More than 520,000 African Americans have glaucoma, and this number is expected to exceed 860,000 by 2030. Additionally, half of all people with glaucoma don’t know they have it.

What is it?
• Glaucoma is a group of eye diseases that can damage the optic nerve. It affects side, or peripheral, vision first, and if left untreated, it can cause vision loss and blindness.

What causes it?
• Several studies have shown that increased eye pressure is a major risk factor for optic nerve damage.

What are the symptoms?
• There are usually no symptoms or pain in the early stages.

How can you focus on your vision?
• If you are over age 40 or have a family history of glaucoma, have a comprehensive dilated eye exam every 1 to 2 years.

For more information on glaucoma and tips on maintaining healthy vision, visit www.nei.nih.gov/glaucoma.
LOW VISION

If you are living with low vision, vision rehabilitation can help you make the most of the vision you do have and maintain your independence. Approximately 188,000 African Americans have low vision, and this number is expected to reach 366,000 by 2030. However, most African Americans have never heard of low vision.

What is it?

- Low vision is when even with regular glasses, contact lenses, medicine, or surgery, people have difficulty seeing, making everyday tasks difficult to do.

What causes it?

- Eye diseases or health disorders
- Eye injuries
- Birth defects

What are the signs of low vision?

Even when wearing your glasses or contact lenses, you still have difficulty:

- Recognizing the faces of family and friends.
- Reading, cooking, or doing daily activities.
- Selecting and matching the color of your clothes.

How can you focus on your vision?

People with low vision should:

- See an eye care professional as often as recommended.
- Learn about vision rehabilitation.
- Get a good support team that includes yourself, your primary eye care professional, a low vision specialist, and rehabilitation specialists.

VISION REHABILITATION CAN HELP

Rehabilitation services can help people with low vision make the most of their remaining vision and stay independent by teaching them how to:

- Move safely around the home.
- Continue to read, cook, or do other activities.
- Find resources, adaptive devices, and support.

For more information on low vision and vision rehabilitation, visit [www.nei.nih.gov/lowvision](http://www.nei.nih.gov/lowvision).