

Eyes Over 40

How Aging Affects Your Vision



Many consider age 40 to be the dividing line between youth and middle age. When this benchmark birthday rolls around, the newly-minted middle-aged are freshly reminded of the ways in which their bodies are growing older.

Not all of us experience aging in the same way, but there is one indicator that is almost universal among the middle-aged: diminishing eyesight. Chances are good that you cannot name even a few over-40 friends or family members who do not need vision correction.

“Old age is no place for sissies,” actress Bette Davis once remarked. She was right. As we age, our bodies—including eyes—are subject to a gradual physical decline. Normal age-related eye changes include:

Presbyopia. At around age 40, the eye’s lens begins to harden, leading to gradually worsening eyesight. This is presbyopia, part of the usual aging process. If your vision was perfect before developing presbyopia, you will now probably need reading glasses. If not, your doctor will prescribe new lenses.

Dry Eye Syndrome. Over time, our eyes produce fewer tears and become dry, scratchy and irritated as a result. This often increases for women after menopause. Artificial tears can provide comfort.

Light & Perception Changes. Aging slows the ability to adapt to darkness. The pupil becomes less able to dilate

(widen) fully, reducing the amount of light that can enter the eye. Aging also affects color vision. The yellowing of the lens is believed to be responsible for reducing the ability to distinguish between different shades of blue and green. Perception of a complex, changing scene may also become more difficult.

Age-Related Diseases

The vision changes that occur with age are distinct from age-related eye diseases, although their effects may be similar. Here are the most common eye disorders among people over 40:

Age-Related Macular Degeneration (AMD). AMD is the leading cause of irreversible vision loss for those over age 65 in the U.S. It currently affects 2 million Americans over 50. AMD gradually destroys the sharp, central vision needed for such common tasks as reading and driving. Symptoms, while not always apparent, include visual distortions, trouble recognizing faces and a need for more light. Once they appear, permanent vision loss may already have occurred. Eyes may be treated with laser surgery, but vision already lost cannot be restored.

Glaucoma. Sometimes called the “silent thief of sight,” this disorder can permanently destroy eyesight before symptoms become noticeable. Glaucoma is responsible for the legal blindness of approximately 120,000 people in the U.S. More than 2.2 million Americans over age 40 have glaucoma, but fully half are unaware of it. Glaucoma is the

second-leading cause of blindness in the U.S. overall, and the primary cause among African Americans. Glaucoma results from a defect in the eye's drainage system that increases pressure inside the eye. The most common type is treated with prescription eye drops. The more serious form can result in a sudden increase in eye pressure, causing severe pain, nausea, blurred vision and redness. It requires emergency surgery.

Cataracts. Today more than 22 million Americans over age 40 have cataracts, a leading cause of impaired eyesight. More than half will develop cataracts by their 80th birthday. A cataract forms when age-related changes occur in the proteins that are packed into the eye's lens, blocking out light. It grows very slowly and causes few symptoms in its early stages. Eventually, blurry distance vision, sensitivity to glare, loss of contrast and difficulty seeing colors may result. The only treatment is surgical removal, a common and safe operation that usually includes insertion of a lens implant to restore vision.

Diabetic Retinopathy. You probably know at least one of the over 20 million Americans with diabetes, 4.5 million of whom are over age 40. Diabetes can weaken the small blood vessels in the retina, causing bleeding and scarring, which can lead to vision loss. This complication currently affects 4.1 million Americans. Everyone with diabetes (both Type 1 and Type 2) is at risk, especially those who are older or in poor health. Symptoms include blind spots, unexplained blurred vision and "floaters." Laser surgery is used to treat it.

Be Kind to Your Body

You can boost your eye health through healthy eating, regular exercise and protecting your eyes from the environment.

Eat Eye-Healthy Foods. New research suggests that a healthy diet may help prevent cataracts and AMD from developing. Choose foods containing vitamins C and E, as well as the antioxidants lutein and zeaxanthin.

Keep Exercising. A large 2006 study of men and women between ages 43 and 86 concluded that those who walked at least three times a week were 70% less likely to develop AMD than those who were sedentary.

Use Proper Lighting. Make sure your indoor lighting is adequate, and take extra care when driving at night. Add an anti-reflective coating to your eyeglasses to maximize the amount of light entering your eyes.

Shield Eyes from the Sun. Overexposure to the sun's harmful ultraviolet rays can damage eyes. When outdoors, protect them by wearing a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses that provide at least 98% UVA and UVB protection.

Breathe Clean Air. Limit exposure to smoke and allergens. Wear protective goggles while working in the yard or around harsh chemicals. If you smoke, quit. Smokers are three to four times more likely to develop AMD than non-smokers. Non-smokers living with smokers almost double their risk.

Protect Yourself With Eye Exams

Your odds of maintaining healthy eyes throughout your life improve greatly with routine eye checkups. Most eye problems can be treated, cured or prevented through regular evaluations and open communication with your eye care provider. The American Academy of Optometry recommends comprehensive exams at least annually for people over age 65. For those under 65, follow your eye doctor's guidelines based on your risk factors.

Today's middle-aged and older adults are healthier than past generations. Medical and technological advancements allow them to benefit from timely diagnoses and treatments that were unavailable to their parents. Take advantage of these gains by having regular comprehensive eye exams with your Davis Vision eye care provider, and keep your vision healthy!

Sources: American Optometric Association, Prevent Blindness America, British Journal of Ophthalmology

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