



Glaucoma

By Brandie Shaw

Glaucoma is the second leading cause of blindness in Americans over 40 years old. While the cause of glaucoma is not known, it occurs when the natural fluids in the eye don't drain correctly. This causes a rise in the internal pressure inside the eye.

If elevated pressure is allowed to continue unchecked, eventually the optic nerve will be damaged. Your optic nerve carries information from your eyes to your brain. Once this nerve is damaged, it can't be repaired. Patients with optic nerve damage usually experience "tunnel vision," a loss of the vision in the periphery, or around the edges of your sight.

There are two main forms of glaucoma. Acute Angle-Closure Glaucoma is characterized by blurred vision, pain and redness of the eye and the appearance of colored rings around lights. The more common Open-Angle Glaucoma develops more slowly.

Over 2.2 million Americans over 40 are currently being treated for glaucoma; however, it is estimated that there could be millions more that don't even know they have the disease. Most forms of glaucoma have no symptoms at all.

Without any warning signs how can you know that you have the disease? Fortunately, your eye doctor can perform a comprehensive eye examination, which includes visual acuity, tonometry, ophthalmoscopy and a visual field test to diagnose the disease.

There is no "cure" for glaucoma. Fortunately, however, it is easy to treat. When diagnosed early enough, it can usually be controlled and the devastating eye damage prevented. The treatment can be as simple as a prescription for eye drops, or surgery may be required.

Most cases of glaucoma occur in patients over the age of 40, especially in African Americans or in those who have a family history of the disease. But is it very important to realize that glaucoma can strike anyone at any time. The American Optometric Association strongly recommends that everyone have an eye exam that includes tonometry and ophthalmoscopy (a visual examination of the back of the eye) regularly because what you don't know can hurt you in the case of this "silent thief" of sight.

Sources: Prevent Blindness America, American Optometric Association