Take some steps to reduce the chance of vision problems

Vision problems and medical eye conditions often can come with age. And this is a growing problem due to the aging population.

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According to the National Eye Institute, by the year 2020, more than 43 million Americans over the age of 40 will have some form of vision impairment due to macular degeneration (AMD), glaucoma, diabetes or cataract.

Early detection and treatment are vital to effectively manage many eye diseases.

Here are some simple steps that you can incorporate into your routine to help keep your eyes healthy.

1. Schedule regular eye exams. Many eye-related diseases start with painless symptoms, but an eye doctor – optometrist or ophthalmologist – may be able to detect early signs of a problem during an eye exam.

Adults should have an eye exam every one to two years, depending on existing vision issues, medical eye problems, and risk factors.

2. Stop smoking. The chemicals inhaled while smoking restrict blood flow to the sensitive cells of the retina and may damage the crystalline lens of the eye. Smokers are four times more likely to develop AMD and three times more likely to have cataracts.

3. Wear protective eyewear. Safety goggles and sunglasses can prevent long-term damage or injury. The eye is fragile and can be easily damaged by foreign objects. Safety goggles will help protect your eyes from injury, even during everyday tasks, like gardening with a weed whacker or doing home repairs. Prevent Blindness America estimates that 90 percent of eye injuries can be prevented with protective eyewear.

Sunglasses protect against ultraviolet (UV) rays, which increase the risk of developing cataracts or skin cancer. UV rays can penetrate light cloud cover, so it's important to wear sunglasses on overcast days, not just when the weather is bright and sunny. Your eye doctor can help you choose a pair of sunglasses with UV protection.

4. Exercise regularly. Good exercise habits are beneficial to the entire body, including your eyes. Exercise stimulates oxygen intake and blood circulation to help keep the eyes healthy.

5. Take vitamins. Like other parts of your body, the eye needs nutrients to stay healthy. A daily multi-vitamin may improve your overall health, including your vision, and several recent studies have found that Lutein or Zeaxanthin may help reduce the risk of developing AMD or cataracts.

Michael Hecht, O.D. is the Medical Director of Premier Eye Care, a national managed eye care company based in Tampa, Florida with operation centers in Delray Beach, Florida and Honolulu, Hawaii. Dr. Hecht practiced within a large multi-specialty ophthalmology practice in Palm Beach County, Florida for 13 years before joining Premier Eye Care in 1993.

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