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The importance and benefits of routine eye exams

Routine eye exams are an important part of maintaining your overall health. As with annual physical or dental exams, it is extremely important that you have your eyes examined regularly, even if you are not experiencing vision or medical eye problems.

As with all good habits, it's best to start early. A child should have an eye exam before his or her first birthday, and then once before starting first grade and unless otherwise recommended, every two years thereafter until the age of 18. If detected early, Amblyopia, an eye condition sometimes known as "lazy eye," may be treated with glasses or surgical intervention.

Regular eye exams are especially important for children because their eyes can change significantly in as little as a year as the muscles and tissue develop. Good eyesight is critical for a child's academic achievement; if children have difficulty reading the blackboard or books, their learning may be impeded. During an eye exam, eye doctors will check for binocular vision conditions that can affect how the eyes move and focus together.

Adults should have an eye exam every one to two years, depending on any existing vision problems, eye conditions, or risk factors such as diabetes, previous eye injuries or family history. Regular eye exams will ensure that eyeglass prescriptions are current and offer an opportunity for checking for early signs of eye disease.

Selecting the best eye care doctor for your needs is the first step before scheduling an appointment. Optometrists are eye doctors who can

perform routine eye exams, diagnose and treat medical eye conditions, however cannot perform surgery. An ophthalmologist is a medical doctor who specializes in eye care, and can perform eye surgery in addition to diagnosing and treating eye conditions.

In addition to diagnosing and treating vision problems, an eye doctor may be able to detect other health issues during the exam. The eye is an extension of the brain, and the only part of the body where blood vessels and tissue are visible. This allows an eye doctor to detect other types of warning signs or the early stages of different health problems, such as diabetes and high blood pressure.

The American Diabetes Association estimates that more than 8 million Americans have diabetes and do not know it. Diabetes can cause blindness, nerve damage, kidney disease, stroke or heart disease if left undiagnosed and untreated. During a routine eye exam, an eye doctor can detect early symptoms of diabetes, such as bleeding in the eye or swelling in parts of the retina.

Besides diabetes, there are several other health problems that may be detected during an eye exam, including:

1. Brain tumors. A brain tumor may cause swelling of the optic nerve.

2. Rheumatoid arthritis. One sign of rheumatoid arthritis or other autoimmune disorders may be dry eyes, which can be easily detected during an eye exam.

3. Eyelid skin cancer. The eyelid is very sensitive to ultraviolet rays and may be one of the first places affected by different types of skin cancers. Eye doctors may be able to see spots or affected areas before a skin cancer can spread to other parts of the body.

4. High blood pressure. Blood vessels in the back of the eye may appear bent or leaking in the patient with high blood pressure.

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