

Eye Disease Facts for Physician Assistants



What should Physician Assistants know about eye health?

Physician assistants can help protect their patients from vision loss or blindness by recognizing risk factors associated with common eye diseases and recommending they see an eye care professional for a comprehensive dilated eye exam. Eye diseases often have no early warning signs or symptoms. However, with early detection, treatment and appropriate follow-up care, vision loss and blindness from eye disease can be prevented or delayed. Talk to all your patients about their eye health, especially those at higher risk for diabetic retinopathy, age-related macular degeneration, glaucoma and cataract.



Diabetic Retinopathy



Diabetic retinopathy is the most common diabetic eye disease. It is caused by changes in the blood vessels of the retina. One in every 12 people with diabetes aged 40 and older has vision-threatening diabetic retinopathy.

Symptoms: No signs or symptoms in its early stages.

Risk Factors: All people with diabetes (type 1, type 2 or gestational) are at risk. The longer a person has diabetes, the more likely he or she is to develop retinopathy. Controlling blood glucose levels, blood pressure and cholesterol can prevent or delay the progression of diabetic retinopathy.

Detection: Patients with diabetes should have a comprehensive dilated eye examination at least once a year. Patients with proliferative retinopathy can reduce their risk of blindness by 95 percent with timely treatment and appropriate follow-up care.

Age-Related Macular Degeneration (AMD)

AMD is a leading cause of vision loss in Americans age 60 and older, which gradually destroys sharp, central vision. Dry AMD occurs when the light-sensitive cells in the macula slowly break down. Wet AMD occurs when abnormal blood vessels behind the retina start to grow under the macula.



Symptoms: Neither dry nor wet AMD cause pain.

For dry AMD, the most common early sign is blurred vision. For wet AMD the classic early symptom is that straight lines appear crooked.

Risk Factors: The greatest risk factor is age. Others risks include smoking, family history, and race, with Caucasians being more likely to lose vision from AMD.

Detection: Encourage all patients over 50 to have a comprehensive dilated eye examination every year.

In some cases, AMD advances so slowly that people notice little change in their vision. In others, the disease progresses faster and may lead to a loss of vision in both eyes.



Glaucoma



Glaucoma is a group of diseases that can damage the eye's optic nerve. It occurs when the normal fluid pressure inside the eyes slowly rises.

Symptoms: There are often no early warning signs or symptoms.

Risk Factors: African Americans over the age of 40, everyone over the age of 60 (especially Mexican Americans), and people with a family history are at higher risk.

Detection: Patients at higher risk should have a comprehensive dilated eye examination every 1 to 2 years.

Early detection and treatment is the best way to control the disease. Left untreated, glaucoma can lead to permanent vision loss or blindness.

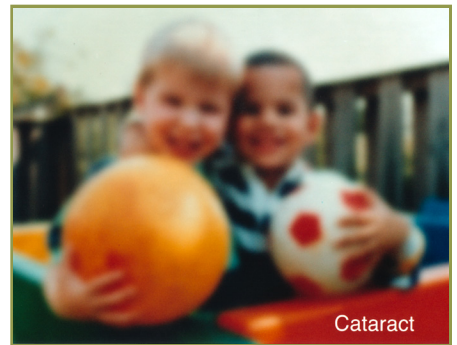
Cataract

A cataract is a clouding of the lens in the eye. It can occur in one or both eyes. It cannot spread from one eye to the other. By the age of 80, more than half of all Americans either have a cataract or have had cataract surgery.

Symptoms: Common symptoms include cloudy or blurry vision, colors seem faded, glare from lights, poor night vision, double vision or multiple images in one eye, or frequent prescription changes to glasses or contact lenses.

Risk Factors: Most cataract are related to aging. Other risk factors include having diabetes, personal behaviors such as smoking or alcohol use, or prolonged exposure to sunlight.

Detection: Encourage all patients over 50 to have a comprehensive dilated eye examination every year.



For additional information and patient education resources, visit:

National Eye Institute (NEI)

<http://www.nei.nih.gov>

The National Eye Institute is part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and is the federal government's lead agency for vision research that leads to sight-saving treatments and plays a key role in reducing visual impairment and blindness.

National Eye Health Education Program (NEHEP)

<http://www.nei.nih.gov/nehep>

NEHEP is a program established by NEI to ensure that vision is a health priority by translating eye and vision research into public and professional education programs.

