



THE COLLEGE OF
OPTOMETRISTS

Professional Excellence
in Eye Health

Lifestyle and eyes



Overview

Your eyes are affected by your lifestyle and health conditions elsewhere in your body. This leaflet highlights the effect your lifestyle and health can have on your eyes. It should not replace information that is given to you by a healthcare professional. If you have any questions about your eyes then please speak to your optometrist.



If you have any concerns about the health of your eyes, please visit your local optometrist. Optometrists are the eye-health specialists on the high street. An eye examination is a vital health check and should be part of everyone's normal health care.

Smoking

There is good evidence that smoking causes sight loss. Tobacco smoke has up to 4,000 active compounds. Most of these are toxic and potentially damaging to the eyes.

Smokers are up to four times more likely to develop age-related macular degeneration (AMD) than non-smokers. AMD is the leading cause of sight loss in the UK. Macular degeneration is when the macula at the back of your eye becomes damaged. This affects your ability to see detail, such as recognising faces or reading or watching television.

Smokers are also more likely than non-smokers to develop cataracts. Cataract is when the lens inside your eye goes cloudy. It does not always affect your vision in the early stages, but tends to get worse as you get older. If it affects your vision you will need an operation to remove the cataract.

Stopping smoking is the single best thing that you can do for your eyes and to improve your current and future health. Many smokers want to quit, and you do not have to do it alone. In some areas optometrists work with the NHS in providing smoking cessation services to help you quit. Ask your optometrist if they are able to help you in this way or, if not, can point you to someone who can.

We have produced leaflets on macular degeneration and cataracts. Ask your optometrist for a copy, or visit lookafteryoureyes.org to find out more.

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Nutrition

Although there is no strong evidence about the effect of diet on AMD, eating a wide variety of fruit and vegetables, including dark green leaves, is good for your general health and may support good eye health.

There are lots of dietary supplements on the market which claim to be beneficial for eye health. There is no good evidence that the general population should be taking these supplements, but they may be helpful for some people who have existing AMD. Discuss whether or not they may be helpful for you with your optometrist.

Obesity

Maintaining a healthy weight is not only good for your general health, but it is also good for your eyes. People who are overweight are more likely to develop diabetes, which in turn may affect your eyes (see below).

Maintaining a healthy weight is also more likely to help you to keep your blood pressure under control. Having high blood pressure can also affect your eyes (see over page).

Diabetes

People who have diabetes are more likely to develop cataract than people who do not, and people who have diabetes may develop diabetic retinopathy. They are also more likely to develop glaucoma.

Diabetic retinopathy is when the small blood vessels in your retina leak blood and fluid into the retina. Although this does not affect your vision in the early stages, if it is left untreated it may lead to sight loss.

Eating a wide variety of fruit and vegetables, including dark green leaves, is good for your general health and may support good eye health.

You can reduce your risk of developing diabetic retinopathy by keeping your blood sugar under control as much as you can.

With a few exceptions, the NHS arranges for all people who have diabetes and are aged 12 and over to be invited to have screening for diabetic retinopathy. This is to reduce the risk of sight loss, so it is important that you have the screening done if you are eligible. The screening involves putting drops in your eyes to make your pupils larger. You will then have photographs taken of the retina at the back of your eye. It is very important that you have this done regularly, as early detection of diabetic retinopathy means that treatment is more effective. Most people will need to have the screening done every year. If you have not been invited to have your retinal screening done within the past 12 months you should speak to your general practitioner (GP) about this.

The retinal screening only checks to see if you have diabetic retinopathy. It does not check for other eye diseases such as cataracts or glaucoma. It is therefore important that you continue to have regular eye examinations with your optometrist to make sure that you can see clearly and comfortably, and also that you have no other eye disease. Your optometrist will tell you how often you should have this done.

High blood pressure and high cholesterol

Hypertension (high blood pressure) and high cholesterol increase your risk of having a stroke. They also increase your risk of having a blood vessel at the back of your eye bleed or become blocked.

A stroke happens when a blood vessel in your brain bleeds or becomes blocked. This can affect your vision if it is in the part of the brain that you use to see with. It can cause blind spots in your vision that may mean that you have problems reading, are no longer able to drive, and you may bump into things.

Having high blood pressure also increases your risk of developing glaucoma.

If a blood vessel at the back of your eye bleeds or becomes blocked this may seriously affect your vision and in some cases lead to total sight loss in one eye.

Having high blood pressure also increases your risk of developing glaucoma. Glaucoma is when the pressure inside your eye damages the optic nerve at the back of your eye.

We have produced a leaflet on glaucoma. Ask your optometrist for a copy, or visit lookafteryoureyes.org to find out more.

Sunshine

Exposure to ultraviolet (UV) light has been linked to certain eye conditions including cataract, and there may be a link between exposure to UV light and AMD. If you spend lots of time outdoors, you should protect your eyes from the sun. You can do this by wearing a hat with a brim and by wearing well fitting sunglasses that you bought from a reputable retailer and which carry the CE mark. This is the manufacturer's assurance that the sunglasses have been made according to the appropriate safety standards.

Screen use

Many people worry that looking at a screen, such as a computer, tablet or mobile phone, may damage their eyes. There is no evidence that looking at screens will cause your eyes any harm. Looking at something on a screen has advantages over looking at something on paper: the contrast is good and can be altered, and you can make the print bigger, although you need to make sure that the reflections from the screen do not get in the way of what you are looking at. Some people find that looking at a screen for a long time is tiring. To give your eyes a rest we recommend the 20:20:20 rule. This means that every 20 minutes you should look at something about 20 feet away for about 20 seconds. Although this is only a guide, it does remind you to take regular (short) breaks from screen use. Because looking at a screen for a long time can be quite demanding for your eyes, you may find that – even if you don't need glasses for regular use – you may need to wear glasses for prolonged screen use. Your optometrist will be able to advise you about this.

For more information, please talk to your local optometrist.

The College is the professional body for optometry. It qualifies the profession and delivers the guidance and development to ensure optometrists provide the best possible care. Our members use MCOptom or FCOptom after their name. Membership of the College shows their commitment to the very highest clinical, ethical and professional standards. Look for the letters MCOptom or FCOptom to see if your optometrist is a member.

Please visit **lookafteryoureyes.org** for more information.

This information should not replace advice that your optometrist or other relevant health professional gives you.



We support research into optometry, optics, vision science and related subjects, and we are accepting donations to our Research Fund to help us to develop this work. Your support will make sure that we can continue to make breakthroughs in caring for your vision. Find out more and donate at college-optometrists.org/research-fund.

Your local optometrist



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