

What You Should Know About Glaucoma

What is glaucoma?

Glaucoma is an eye disease that may cause loss of vision. It occurs as a result of a buildup of fluid in the eyeball. Imagine that the inside of your eye is like a sink, with the faucet always running and the drain always open. If the drain of the sink becomes clogged, water builds up in the sink. Like water in the sink, the fluid in your eye moves in and out. The fluid nourishes your eye and keeps it healthy. After the fluid circulates, it empties through a drain in the front of your eye. In people with glaucoma, the drain in the eye is blocked and the fluid can't run out of the eyeball. Instead, the fluid builds up and causes increased pressure in the eye.

How does increased pressure damage your eye?

The elevated pressure destroys the nerve cells in your eye, causing you to lose your vision. At first, you may have blind spots only in your *peripheral*, or side, vision. If your glaucoma isn't treated, your central vision will also be affected. When glaucoma causes vision loss, the loss is permanent, because nothing can restore dead nerve cells.

What are the symptoms of glaucoma?

Most people with glaucoma don't have any symptoms of the disease. You might not realize that you're losing vision until it's too late. One-half of all people with loss of vision caused by glaucoma are not aware they have the disease. By the time they notice loss of vision, the eye damage is severe.

Rarely, an individual will have an acute attack of glaucoma. In these cases, the eye becomes red and extremely painful. Also, nausea, vomiting and blurred vision may occur.

Who gets glaucoma?

Risk factors for glaucoma include older age, black race, family history of glaucoma, high pressure in the eyes, diabetes, hypertension and near-sightedness.

How do I know if I have glaucoma?

You won't know you have glaucoma until you notice vision loss. Since glaucoma has no symptoms, it is important that you have a complete eye exam by an ophthalmologist. An ophthalmologist is a doctor who is trained to provide care of the eyes, including the diagnosis and treatment of glaucoma. Your ophthalmologist can measure your eye pressure, examine your optic nerve and evaluate your central and peripheral vision during an eye examination. Early diagnosis and treatment of glaucoma can prevent damage to the eye's nerve cells and vision loss.

How often should I have an eye exam?

It is recommended that you have a complete eye exam by age 39. After that, eye exams should be done every two to four years. After age 64, they should be done every one to two years.

What is the treatment for glaucoma?

Glaucoma can be treated with eyedrops, pills, laser surgery, eye surgery or a combination of methods. The purpose of treatment is to lower the pressure in the eye so that further nerve damage and vision loss are prevented.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.



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