



This year seems the perfect time to focus on preserving your eyesight. That's why AARP is launching Vision 2020, a yearlong series to help keep you seeing clearly, now and for decades to come.



The Eyes Have It

How to treat the most common vision ailments, from slightly annoying to serious By JESSICA MIGALA

YOU MAY think that recent changes in your vision are just another sign you're getting older. That may not be so. While nearly half of the people who struggle with a visual disability are 65 or older, many of those cases could have been prevented. "It's not normal to be losing vision as you get older, and there's usually an under-

lying reason," says Rahul Khurana, physician and clinical spokesperson for the American Academy of Ophthalmology. With new treatments for a variety of eye diseases, doctors can slow the progression or reverse the damage—though you have to know what's going on first. Here are some troubling eye symptoms and what to do if you experience one.

You have double vision

First, a self-test: Cover one eye. Is the symptom still there? If yes, that's good news. The cause could be dryness; using artificial tears to lubricate the eye surface may help, says Jennifer Eikenberry, M.D., an assistant professor of clinical ophthalmology at Indiana University School of Medicine. More worrisome is when the problem is "binocular," meaning that double vision disappears when you close one eye. "It's a sign that your eyes are not aligned, and we worry that the double vision is caused by a nerve palsy from a stroke or aneurysm," she explains.

You see floaters or flashes

With aging, the gel-like substance in your eye starts to liquefy; as it pulls away from the retina, you may see dark moving spots called floaters. According to Khurana, 85 percent of the time, these are not dangerous. But if you see new floaters or flashes of light in your field of vision, contact an ophthalmologist immediately; you may need a dilated eye exam to rule out a retinal tear.

Your eyes feel dry

You may be soaking up too much screen time. Staring at a screen cuts your blink rate in half, so your eyes get parched and uncomfortable easily. If you're experiencing dry eye daily, take frequent breaks and use preservative-free artificial tears four times a day (whether or not you think you need them), Eikenberry says.

You have a sharp eye pain

If it was a split second of hurt, you're OK now, and your vision is fine, then you don't have to sound the alarm, she notes. If, however, the pain lasts awhile, is recurring or is associated with redness, discharge or blurry vision, call your eye doctor, she advises. Eye pain can be caused by a foreign body, infection or injury.



Your vision is unusually blurry

You'll need an eye exam, to check the cornea (is there any dryness?), lens (cataracts?) and retina (any bleeding or abnormal blood vessels that would suggest diabetes or high blood pressure?), Eikenberry says. If all is clear, the doctor will work to optimize your glasses prescription and, for dry eye, may recommend artificial tears. Both steps can help sharpen vision.

You're losing peripheral vision

A gradual decrease in your ability to see out of the sides of your eyes may indicate glaucoma, a condition in which pressure builds up in the eye and damages the optic nerve, Eikenberry explains. Any degradation warrants a scheduled visit to your eye doc. But losing peripheral vision suddenly or to one side may be a sign of a more immediate issue, such as a stroke, tumor or, if accompanied by flashes and floaters, retinal detachment; these symptoms call for an immediate exam.

You're having trouble reading

Presbyopia occurs when the lens loses its ability to change shape and accommodate for close-up vision; this naturally develops after age 40 or so. Although drugstore readers can help, see your optometrist or ophthalmologist: You may now be a good candidate for contact lenses.

You see dark spots in the center of your vision

People describe floaters as spots that move when the eye does. But if you're seeing a blurry or blind spot

in the center of your vision when you're reading a book or watching TV, that's not a floater, Khurana says. Choroidal neovascular macular degeneration (aka wet AMD) is one concern; abnormal blood vessels grow under the retina and can leak fluid. Wet AMD can be treated effectively with drugs and other therapies—only if you catch it early.

You have reduced night vision

It may be as simple as uncorrected nearsightedness. "Vision problems often become apparent at night, when the pupil dilates," notes Doug Wisner, a cataract surgeon and assistant professor of ophthalmology at Wills Eye Hospital in Philadelphia. A new glasses prescription may be all you need. But another possibility is cataracts, a clouding of the lens that can happen with age.



You see glare when you drive

It's not just you: The glare from headlights is becoming a problem for everyone, thanks to new designs that incorporate LEDs, a higher-intensity blue-wavelength light, Wisner says. Glare, though, can indicate a variety of problems, from dry eye to cataracts, so it's always a good thing to get checked out, he adds. Regular exams also ensure you're using your best prescription, which is needed for clear vision at night. ■

Jessica Migala has written for Prevention, Self, Marie Claire and over 30 other magazines.



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