

# The Eyes have it



Health Matters

By Kerry Sauser

Spring has brought us a riot of beautifully colored blossoms, emerald green grass and bright sunshine—welcome sights for certain. The beauty of spring reminds us of the many pleasures our gift of sight brings to us. It's a good opportunity to review how we care for our priceless "windows to the world"—our eyes.

The eye is a wonderful structure that allows the complex process of sight to occur. Vision begins when light enters the cornea (the clear, front part of the eye) and divergent light is bent into a more uniform path. Next the light passes through the lens and the liquid that fills the eye where it is focused onto the back of the eye, the retina. The focused patterns of light on the retina activate millions of specialized cells that send electrochemical impulses via the optic nerve to the brain for processing into the images we see. Good vision requires a healthy vascular system and metabolism to keep the eye structures in good repair, to support the impulse-delivering nervous system, and to fuel the translating organ, the brain.

Wonderful weather outside lets us focus on sports, recreation and home im-

provement projects. These fun activities can also be rather dangerous to our eyes. According to the American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO), there are over 40,000 eye injuries each year attributed to sports alone; baseball, basketball and racquet sports cause the greatest number. Fishing also carries a risk, with the possibility of severe eye injuries due to punctures and lacerations by errant hooks. Swimming pool chlorine, cleaning products, garden chemicals, paint, gasoline and a myriad of other substances we use daily pose threats to our eyes, too. And don't forget the sun. Excess ultraviolet light can contribute to cataracts (clouding of the lens) and discoloration of the whites of the eye.

The AAO says over 90 percent of eye injuries are preventable. Most sports injuries are caused by being hit in the face with a ball. Such injuries can be eliminated or minimized with proper protective gear, (goggles, face masks, helmets), age appropriate activity, and proper vision correction for the participant.

Age and overall health can also affect eye health. As we age, circulation and nutrient delivery can decrease, muscles that regulate the size of the pupils weaken, and free-radical damage to eye tissues can increase. (Free radical damage comes from toxins, sub-optimal digestion, even ultraviolet damage.) The combination may affect our vision by contributing to cataracts, dry eye syndrome, presbyopia (difficulty focusing on objects that are close—usually starting around age 40), floaters (specks that appear to be drifting across the eye) and more serious concerns

such as macular degeneration. Chronic illnesses like diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, Bell's palsy, some thyroid conditions and even cardiovascular issues can have a major impact on vision, too. In fact, many such conditions are often first detected by routine vision screenings—which is a very strong argument for regular eye exams. Many medications can significantly impact vision. Check with your health care professional if you have any concerns.

Just as safety gear helps prevent eye injuries, lifestyle supports can help keep vision in focus. (Please be cautioned that these supports are not substitutes for proper care and evaluation by a vision professional. Regular eye exams and immediate attention to anything unusual for your eyes is imperative to protecting your eyesight.) That said, it is just common sense that good overall health will help maintain good eye health. Here are some supports that appear to work particularly well for vision:

**Vitamin A**—There was a reason Mother always told us that eating our carrots would make us see better. Vitamin A and its precursor beta-carotene (found in carrots and dark or yellow vegetables) are essential for eye health. Vitamin A is required for the eye to adapt to changes in light and for color vision. It can be particularly effective in relieving dry eye syndrome.

**Zinc**—supports incorporation of Vitamin A and may help reduce night blindness.

**Vitamin C**—essential for lens function

**Bilberry**—is reported to help strengthen small blood vessels in the eyes and to protect eye cells from free radical damage.

**Fish Oil**—In 2008, Researchers at the University of Melbourne found that high intake of omega-3 fatty

acids was associated with a 38% reduction in the risk of late age related macular degeneration.

**Drink water**—Drinking water in small amounts over the course of the day and limiting caffeine may help reduce intraocular pressure.

**Smoking Cessation**—smoking is a big producer of damaging free radicals. It increases risk of eye conditions like cataracts and macular degeneration.

**Sun Protection**—Too much ultraviolet light may also contribute to development of eye problems. Invest in a pair of sunglasses with UV protection, and don't forget to wear them in winter, when glare from snowy surfaces increases UV exposure.

**Manage Chronic Illness and Eat Healthy**—As mentioned before, overall health is particularly important to eye health. If you have diabetes, manage your blood sugar well—it has a serious impact on your vision. And for all of us, a diet containing plenty of fruits and vegetables will reward with good vision as well as good overall health.

Follow these simple guidelines and the world will look bright for a long time to come!

Until next month...Heal well, be well...naturally!

K.S.

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