

Lifestyle and eyes

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Overview

This leaflet explains how your lifestyle and health affect your eyes. It should not replace information that is given to you by a healthcare professional. If you have any questions about your eyes, please speak to your optometrist.

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 could damage the eyes.

Smokers are up to four times more likely than non-smokers to develop age-related macular degeneration (AMD). AMD is the leading cause of sight loss in the UK. Macular degeneration is when the macula, which is part of the retina 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. Cataracts are formed when the lens inside your eye goes cloudy. They don't always affect your vision in the early stages, but tend to get worse as you get older. If a cataract is affecting your vision, you will need an operation to remove it.

The single best thing that you can do for your eyes and to improve your current and future health is to stop smoking. If you want to quit, you don't have to do it alone. In some areas, optometrists work with the NHS to provide services to help you give up smoking. Ask your optometrist if they can help you in this way or if they can point you to someone who can. To find out more information about support for stopping smoking you can go to the Live Well section in **NHS.uk** website.

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

Eating a wide variety of colourful fruit and vegetables, including dark green leaves, is good for your general health and may support good eye health. However, there is no strong evidence about the effect of diet on your 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 you should be taking these supplements.

One large trial in the USA (AREDS 1 and 2) showed that taking certain nutritional supplements may slow down the rate at which AMD progresses in some people. It is not clear whether this is the case in the wider population. According to the National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE), the available evidence is not strong enough to recommend making changes to your diet or taking nutritional supplements for AMD. Ask your optometrist whether nutritional supplements may be helpful for you. If you smoke or have been exposed to asbestos, you should not take supplements that contain beta carotene as they may be harmful to you.

Weight

Maintaining a healthy weight is not only good for your general health, it is also good for your eyes. If you are overweight, you are more likely to develop diabetes. This may in turn affect your eyes (see below). Being overweight means you are more at risk of developing late AMD and cataracts.

Staying a healthy weight is also more likely to help keep your blood pressure under control. This is important as having high blood pressure can also affect your eyes.

Diabetes

If you have diabetes, you are more likely to develop cataracts. You may also be more likely to develop 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.

If you have diabetes, you may develop diabetic retinopathy. Although you may not notice any changes to your vision until the very late stages. Treating it early can help prevent sight loss. Keeping your blood sugar levels under control can help reduce your risk of developing diabetic retinopathy.

If you have diabetes and are aged 12 or over, you should 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. Treatment for diabetic retinopathy is more effective if the condition is detected early. This means it is very important that you attend your screening appointments, particularly as you may not notice any change to your vision until the very late stages. 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.

The retinal screening only checks to see if you have diabetic retinopathy. It does not check for other conditions such as cataracts or glaucoma. It is important that you continue to have regular eye examinations with your optometrist. This is to make sure your vision is clear and comfortable and you have no other eye conditions. Your optometrist will tell you how often you should have your eyes examined.



If a blood vessel at the back of your eye is blocked or bleeds, this may cause serious changes in your vision. In some cases this may lead to total sight loss in one eye.

High blood pressure and high cholesterol

Hypertension (high blood pressure) and high cholesterol increase your risk of stroke. They also increase your risk of having a blood vessel at the back of your eye bleed or become blocked. Having hypertension or a diet that is high in fat also increases your risk of developing late AMD and glaucoma.

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. It can lead to blind spots in your vision that may cause problems with reading. It can also mean you are no longer able to drive, and you may bump into things when walking.

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You can reduce your risk of these problems by keeping your blood pressure and cholesterol levels under control.

Prolonged exposure to ultraviolet (UV) light

Prolonged exposure to ultraviolet (UV) light has been linked to certain eye conditions such as cataracts. There also 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 wide brim and well-fitting sunglasses. Buy your sunglasses from a reputable retailer and make sure they carry the CE or UKCA mark. This is the manufacturer's assurance that the sunglasses have been made 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. With a screen you can alter the contrast, and you can make the print bigger. However, 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 the screen.



There is no evidence that looking at screens will cause your eyes any harm.

Looking at a screen for a long time can be quite demanding for your eyes. You may find that you need to wear glasses for screen use, even if you don't need them for regular use. Your optometrist will be able to advise you on this.



If you have any concerns about the health of your eyes, please visit your local optometrist. Optometrists are eye health specialists.

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

For more information, please talk to your local optometrist.

If you have any concerns about the health of your eyes, please visit your local optometrist. Optometrists are eye health specialists. An eye examination is a vital health check and should be part of everyone's regular health care. Visit **lookafteryoureyes.org** for clear and helpful information on vision and eye health issues and keeping your eyes healthy.

The College of Optometrists is the professional body for optometry. We provide qualifications, guidance and development opportunities for optometrists so that they can maintain and develop the knowledge and skills they need to deliver the highest standards of care. Membership of the College shows your optometrist's 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 or fellow of the College. Other letters after your optometrist's name mean they have done further training and gained extra qualifications in diagnosing and managing specific eye conditions. The qualifications are available in different subject areas such as low vision, paediatric eye care, glaucoma and macular degeneration.