

## **Protect your Eyes from Glaucoma**

Did you know that you could be at risk for glaucoma, a disease that has almost no early symptoms, but could result in vision loss or even blindness? Glaucoma is one of the leading causes of blindness in the United States and the most common cause of blindness among African Americans. Although glaucoma is a dangerous eye disease, vision loss from glaucoma can usually be prevented, reduced or delayed if it is diagnosed early and treated appropriately.

### **What Causes Glaucoma?**

Clear liquid, called the aqueous humor, flows in and out of the eye. This liquid is not part of the tears on the outer surface of the eye. You can think of the flow of aqueous fluid as a sink with the faucet turned on all the time. If the "drainpipe" gets clogged, water collects in the sink and pressure builds up. If the drainage area of the eye -- called the drainage angle -- is blocked, the fluid pressure within the eye may increase and can damage the optic nerve, the nerve that carries the images we see to the brain. Even though the increased pressure usually does not cause pain, or other symptoms, Glaucoma can damage the optic nerve fibers, causing blind spots to develop. If the entire nerve is destroyed, blindness results.

### **Who Gets Glaucoma?**

Glaucoma is one of the leading causes of preventable blindness in the world, and affects over three million people in the United States alone, and half of them don't even know they have this disease. High pressure alone does not mean that you have glaucoma. Your ophthalmologist puts together many kinds of information to determine your risk for developing the disease. Family history of glaucoma is a major risk factor. Although glaucoma can occur in people of all ages, it is primarily a disease that affects older adults. In addition to family history and older age, race is an important risk factor for glaucoma. It occurs four to eight times more often among African Americans than Caucasians, and often occurs earlier in life. Additional

risk factors to glaucoma are if you are diabetic, very nearsighted, or have used steroids for a long period of time.

### **How Often Should I Have an Eye Exam?**

The Virginia Society of Ophthalmology recommends you have an eye examination every three to five years if you are age 40 or over, and every one to two years if: -a family member has glaucoma -you are age 50 or over -you are of African ancestry - you have diabetes, have had a serious eye injury in the past, and/or you are taking steroid medication

### **How is Glaucoma Detected?**

Because glaucoma typically does not cause noticeable vision problems, one of the best ways to prevent vision loss is by having an examination by an EyeMD for glaucoma which may include: questions about your family's medical and eye history; measurement of intraocular pressure (high pressure alone does not mean that you have glaucoma); examination of the optic nerve (which may require pupil dilation); and examination of the drainage angle.

### **How is Glaucoma Treated?**

Glaucoma cannot be cured, but it can be controlled with proper medical treatment. Unfortunately, vision that has been lost due to glaucoma cannot be restored. Treatment includes the use of medications in the form of eye drops or pills, designed to reduce the pressure by slowing the flow of fluid into the eye or by helping to improve fluid drainage. Surgery (laser or incisional) may be recommended, however, this is usually reserved for patients whose pressure cannot be controlled with medication. However, with the introduction of new kinds of technology and medications that have fewer side effects, pressures can be better controlled and help prevent vision loss.

Glaucoma should not be a well-kept family secret. The Virginia Society of Ophthalmology recommends a regular glaucoma eye exam with an EyeMD. For those uninsured, a glaucoma exam and initiation of treatment will be provided at no cost.

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If you have questions or would like a referral to an Ophthalmologist, please contact [EyeCare America](#) at 800-222-EYES (3937).

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