

Watching Out For Elderly Eyes

Q: Is Watching T.V., Or Reading, Bad For My Eyes?

A: No. The Mass Commission for the Blind says our eyes are meant to be used, and they benefit from “exercise” like reading or watching T.V. If your eyes feel tired or “strained,” you can refresh them with rest.

To maintain healthy eyes, you need to become your own health advocate. You rarely will feel pain with eye disorders, but there are some signs to watch for when your vision changes, which may come on very gradually over months:

- * You find yourself sitting closer and closer to the T.V.
- * You need to get stronger eye glasses more often
- * You find it harder to read the newspaper
- * You are bothered more by bright lights
- * You don't see as well at night as you used to
- * You trip over curbs and steps, or bump into chairs and doors

There are 4 major eye diseases that are common in older people:

* **Glaucoma:** a condition which is described as “tunnel vision,” like looking at the world through a straw. Glaucoma can cause a vague ache in your eyes, or watery eyes and halos around objects, and affect your vision in dim light, so-called “night blindness.” If diagnosed early, this disease can be controlled with special eye drops

* **Age-Related Macular Degeneration:** the central area of your retina, known as the macula, which gives you sharp focus, begins to degenerate, leaving your “straight-ahead” vision blurry. This is the most common eye disease among older people.

* **Diabetic Retinopathy:** is a complication often caused by early childhood diabetes. This disease can change the level of vision from day to day, resulting in vision that fades or sharpens irregularly.

* **Cataracts:** are a clouding of the clear lens of the eye, causing blurred or dim vision. Cataracts are usually age-related. Some cataracts never require surgery, and do not progress to any significant level. But a defective lens can be removed in one of the simplest and most successful eye operations. Today, good vision can be restored, using special lenses after surgery.

There is a difference between having “low vision,” and being “legally blind.” Low vision means that even with regular glasses, contact lenses, medicine or surgery, that you find everyday tasks hard to do---like reading your mail, shopping, watching T.V. or cooking. Vision changes like these can be early warning signs of eye disease. Regular dilated eye exams should be part of your routine health care. A specialist in low vision is an optometrist or ophthalmologist who can prescribe visual devices.

Being determined “legally blind” opens up many services for people with failing eyesight. When your vision with the best eyeglasses leaves you with 20/200 vision or less in your better eye, or your peripheral vision is 10 degrees or less—you will be diagnosed as legally blind. State law requires all eye care providers to register legally blind people with the Mass Commission for the Blind within 30 days. If you don't want to be contacted by the Commission, you can ask your eye care provider to put a “Do Not Contact” on your legally blind report.

Being legally blind does not mean you are totally blind, because most people keep a significant degree of useful vision. But there are dozens of services available if you become legally blind---everything from “talking books” to assistance in leading an independent lifestyle, increased Social Security payments, state and federal income tax exemptions/deductions, and an auto excise tax exemption.

Many people who are blind are able to live alone, and remain capable of caring for themselves. But there are “Independent Living Social Services” to help a legally blind person with home management skills, or a referral to elder home care services, as well as orientation and mobility supports. There are also services for people who are deaf-blind, and who are blind and have cognitive impairments.

For any eye concerns, ask your doctor for a referral to an eye care specialist, or call the Mass Commission for the Blind at 1-800-392-6450.