



Jeepers peepers

Lifestyle has an impact on your vision

By Jennifer Nelson

WHILE IT'S A NO-BRAINER that eating right and exercising regularly affects your heart health and cholesterol count, you may be surprised to learn that those things matter to your eyes, too. "The eyes are a barometer of your health," says Sandy Feldman, an ophthalmologist and Costco member in San Diego. Living a healthy lifestyle directly improves your vision and safeguards the health of your eyes, decreasing your risk for eye disease.

Here's how to best protect your peepers.

Dial down your weight

"Maintaining a healthy body through exercise is a vital part of maintaining all of the body's organs, including the eye," says Dr. Richard Nauheim, director of the department of Ophthalmology at South Nassau Communities Hospital and assistant clinical professor of surgery at S.U.N.Y. Stony Brook School of Medicine. Obesity affects sufficient blood flow, even to the eyes. It's also associated with hypertension, high cholesterol and vessel inflammation, which raise the risk for age-related macular degeneration (ARMD), a slow-progressing eye disorder that is the leading cause of blindness in those over 65.

The Costco Connection

Costco members can schedule eye exams and get prescription glasses, contacts and sunglasses at most Costco locations.

A study in the *International Journal of Obesity* found women with a body mass index of 30 or more have an increased risk of cataracts, a clouding of the lens. Plus, regular exercise reduces intraocular pressure in people with glaucoma, a symptomless disorder that causes blindness. Aim to work up a sweat at least 30 minutes, three days per week, to prevent these diseases from stealing your sight.

Safeguard your vision

1. Don't over-wear or sleep with contact lenses in since infections and abrasions can result.
2. Replace eye makeup twice yearly so it doesn't harbor germs that can cause infections.
3. Take hourly breaks from the computer and focus eyes 20 feet away for a few minutes to prevent eye strain.
4. Wear protective polycarbonate safety goggles for activities around the home that pose a risk of flying debris.
5. Check with your doctor about lubricating drops or an artificial-tears solution if you're bothered by dry eyes.—JN

Ditch smoking

If you smoke, you're significantly more likely to develop ARMD. Plus, you're 2.9 times more likely to get cataracts, decades earlier than the 70-year-old norm. Each time you light up, smoking harms the blood vessels in the eye. Quitting halts vessel damage and reduces your risk of these disorders.

Focus on fruits and vegetables

"When your mom told you carrots were good for your eyes, she was giving good advice," says Dr. Feldman. Research shows a diet high in antioxidants as well as certain vitamins and minerals may help prevent or slow the progression of ARMD. Full of vitamin A and beta carotene, veggies such as carrots, sweet potatoes, peaches and mangoes reduce the risk of glaucoma and ARMD. What's more, leafy greens such as spinach, kale, collards and Swiss chard are loaded with lutein and zeaxanthin, carotenoids crucial for the health of the retina. Omega-3 fatty acids, found in fish, nuts and vegetable oils, also lower the risk and slow the progression of ARMD by blocking the buildup of plaque in the arteries and reducing inflammation. And vitamin C-rich choices such as green peppers, tomatoes and oranges help protect the eyes against damage from ultraviolet light.

Don sunglasses

The sun's UVA and UVB rays can actually burn the conjunctiva, the thin membrane covering the whites of the eyes. Ultraviolet light causes cataracts to come on sooner and worsens ARMD too. Besides, ultraviolet light can cause a pterygium, a small fleshy growth that forms on the white of the eye and can interfere with vision. So cover up with sunglasses even on cloudy days. Look for glasses that provide 100 percent UV protection, and buy large frames or frames that fit close to the eyes.

Get your eyes examined

Even if you don't have a vision problem, scheduling an eye exam is important for eye health. Besides assessing your vision, an eye specialist will test your intraocular pressure for glaucoma, examine your retina for damage and check blood vessels, nerve function and blood flow in your eyes. Have an exam once a year until age 20. From 20 to 40, get checked every other year unless you have a health or vision problem, and get checkups annually after age 40.

Just a little attention to eating, exercise and habits can help stave off sight-stealing eye disease, delay cataracts and prevent other conditions from worsening. "Taking care of your overall health directly impacts how well you see," says Dr. Feldman. [E]

Jennifer Nelson covers health for *Self*, *Oprah*, *Prevention* and *Parade* magazines.