

AGE AND THE EYE

Dr William Taylor - Eye Specialist

Introduction

As we all grow older, changes occur in our organ systems including our eyes. Most ocular changes associated with age are not a reflection of disease processes but can have a significant effect on vision.

Failing near vision (presbyopia)

The ability of the lens inside an eye to focus gradually decreases with age. This results in many people over the age of 40 years requiring reading glasses to see clearly for near vision. These reading glasses overcome the requirement of the lens in the eye to change its focal length. They need to be gradually increased in power as the eye loses its focussing ability, but the use of reading glasses does not accelerate or retard this process.

Macular degeneration

In the over 60-year-old age group, reduction in central vision can occur as a consequence of degenerative changes in that part of the retina which we call the macula. The macula is the central part of the retina which is used for reading and other fine visual tasks. The cause of macular degeneration is poorly understood but is believed to be related to exposure of high levels of light over a prolonged period.

The use of sunglasses may decrease the incidence of macular degeneration but most forms of this condition are slowly progressive.

If you are known to have macular degeneration and experience a sudden change in your vision with distortion, reduced near vision or blurred central vision, you should see your ophthalmologist without delay.

Cataracts

Opacification of the lens within an eye is called a cataract.

The incidence of cataracts increases with age and some cataracts may progress to require surgery. Many people over the age of 60 have cataracts but not all require surgery as this is usually only advised when the vision has become blurred to the extent that normal visual tasks are not able to be performed well.

Glaucoma

Glaucoma is an ocular condition in which the pressure inside the eye is too high and is causing loss of vision.

Glaucoma can run in families and is seen more commonly in the over 50 age group but most patients are unaware that they have the disease until it is in an advanced state.

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It is important to have regular eye examinations and be screened for glaucoma, especially if there is a family history.

In most cases the condition can be successfully treated with pressure lowering drops.