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## **Don't Let Glaucoma Rob Your Vision**

With the beginning of a new year, many people have resolved to lose weight, exercise more, eat more nutritiously, or stop smoking in order to improve their health and well-being. One resolution seldom heard is to have an annual eye examination. Considering the Research To Prevent Blindness Survey found that after cancer and heart disease, blindness is the health concern people fear the most, it is surprising that taking care of one's eyesight is not foremost in maintaining one's health for many people.

Despite this fear, over 1 million Americans are losing their sight and they do not even know it. The villain is glaucoma, accountable for the greatest number of cases of preventable blindness in this country. That is because glaucoma often has no early warning signs. The most common form, primary open angle glaucoma, does not blur vision or cause pain. There is no inflammation to indicate the existence of a problem. In fact, most people only realize they have a problem and seek medical attention after they notice the gradual loss of their peripheral vision (what you see out of the corners and sides of your eyes). Unfortunately, then it is too late; vision loss from glaucoma cannot be restored. Experts estimate that of the over 3 million Americans with this disease, about half do not know it.

What exactly is glaucoma? Simply stated, glaucoma is a disorder of the eye in which the fluid in the eye fails to flow and drain as it should, resulting in an increase in the pressure inside the eye. Over time, the elevated pressure interferes with the cell metabolism of the optic nerve and eventually damages the nerve fibers needed for vision. This damage is irreparable and affects the peripheral vision first. About 2% of the population ages 40-50 and 8% over 70 have elevated IOP, according to the National Eye Health Program/National Institutes of Health.

Risk factors for the development of this disease include diabetes, nearsightedness (myopia), hypertension, African ancestry, regular long-term use of steroids or cortisone, having had a previous eye injury, being 45 years of age or older, having a family history of glaucoma, and having abnormally high pressure levels in the eye. However, everyone shares some risk of getting this disease, even people under the age of 45, including babies. (Nearly 1 out of every 10,000 American babies are born with glaucoma.)

Unfortunately, there is no cure for glaucoma, and vision lost cannot be regained. But if detected early, it is possible to halt further loss of vision with medication and/or surgery. Since glaucoma is a chronic condition, it must be monitored for life.

Most people suffer from primary open angle glaucoma, which develops slowly. Often, many years can pass before the loss of sight is noticeable. If detected early, this type of glaucoma responds well to treatment that will slow down or nearly stop the progression of the disease. As already noted, however, any vision lost prior to treatment cannot be restored.

While far fewer people are affected, another type of glaucoma can rob one's vision. Angle closure glaucoma, also known as acute glaucoma or narrow angle glaucoma, is fairly rare. Unlike primary open angle glaucoma, this type is characterized by a rapid rise in pressure in the eye. Medication may not be a sufficient treatment for this form of glaucoma; often surgery to remove a small part of the outer edge of the iris is required to abate its rate of progression.

A third type of glaucoma is a greater mystery. Normal tension glaucoma, or low tension glaucoma, does not involve a buildup of pressure in the eye. The optic nerve suffers damage similar to that found in the other forms of glaucoma, but its victims have what is considered to be normal eye pressure. This type of glaucoma is more likely to occur when there is a family history of this form of the disease, in people of Japanese ancestry, and in those with a history of systemic heart disease, such as irregular heart rhythm.

The fact that glaucoma is a disease to be taken seriously is illustrated by statistics concerning this disorder. Presently, it is estimated that 10,000,000 people in America have high eye pressure that may lead to glaucoma, 2,000,000 more are known to be visually impaired by this condition, and 120,000 people are presently blind from this disease. Every year, glaucoma causes an additional 5,500 new cases of blindness in the United States.

These sobering numbers emphasize the importance of early detection of glaucoma. The best way to detect pressure changes in the eye before vision is lost is through a comprehensive eye examination with dilated pupils. Although 74% of the over 1,000 people interviewed by the Glaucoma Research Foundation said they have their eyes examined at least every two years, only 61% of those (less than half of all adult Americans) are receiving a dilated eye exam. Anyone who has any of the risk factors for this disease under the age of 45 needs a comprehensive eye exam every 2 years, then every year after age 45. (Those without risk factors should have a comprehensive eye examination every 4 years up to age 45, then every 2 years thereafter.) The tests are painless, but only a qualified eye doctor can diagnose and treat this disorder.

Since January is National Glaucoma Month, it is a good time to spread the word about the importance of comprehensive eye exams and the dangers of glaucoma. (A recent survey conducted by Prevent Blindness found of those surveyed, 50% had heard of glaucoma, but were not sure what it was, and 30% had never heard of glaucoma.) The message is becoming more and more urgent given the aging population facing an increased risk from this disease. Considering the irreversible nature of glaucoma and the generally successful treatment when detected early, the importance of regular eye examinations cannot be stressed enough.