

Giving Thanks

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If asked, most of us would list vision as something for which we are truly thankful.

Our eyes work from the moment we open them until we go to sleep at night. It is almost impossible to voluntarily hurt our eyes. But as sensitive as the front of the eye is, there are no pain sensors inside the eye so we cannot detect most eye diseases ourselves. If an eye is healthy then excellent vision is possible with simple corrective lenses. Unhealthy eyes, however, can lead to tragic consequences for vision.

Blindness is a devastating and increasing problem. In a study of 4000 people worldwide, twice as many people were afraid of going blind as were afraid of premature death or heart disease. Blindness leaves us vulnerable, depressed, and often isolated.

The leading cause of blindness worldwide is a condition called cataracts, a clouding of the lens that lies inside the eye. Vision with cataracts is like looking through a steamed-up window. Most cataracts are caused by aging changes, diabetes, and UV exposure. If health care is sought, cataracts can be easily surgically removed and replaced with a tiny, internal, artificial lens. With adjustments made during surgery the resulting vision is often better than ever before.

Other less easily treated causes of blindness are: glaucoma, macular degeneration, and diabetes. Glaucoma is an inherited disease which causes too much pressure in the eye, leading to slow, progressive, painless loss of peripheral vision. A simple "glaucoma test" at the annual eye examination measures eye pressure. Caught early glaucoma can be controlled but not reversed.

Macular degeneration is either slow or sudden loss of our vital central vision. Reading, a prime pastime for the elderly, is very difficult for those with macular degeneration. This disease is caused by a combination of factors: age, genetics, smoking, UV exposure, poor nutrition, and inadequate blood supply.

Diabetes is the leading cause of blindness among adult Americans. The tiny blood vessels responsible for nourishing the eye with oxygen shut down, asphyxiating the visual cells. Diabetic eyes have hemorrhages, swelling, and leaky blood vessels. Blood inside the eye can lead to scarring and permanent blindness. Diabetes is caused by genetics or obesity and is reaching epidemic proportions.

Thankfully most diseases of the eye can be moderated or avoided by simply staying healthy. Proper diet, exercise, rest, not smoking, controlling blood pressure and blood sugar, the presence of good relationships—and regular healthcare—all add up to a healthy body and therefore healthy eyes.

Thank goodness for our eyes this season!