

Wellness Articles

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If you would like to be added to the distribution list for these articles, please email: Rebecca.johnson2@albertahealthservices.ca. You will receive a monthly email containing articles for the upcoming four weeks.

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What is glaucoma?

World Glaucoma Week takes place Mar. 6 to 12.

Glaucoma is the name for a group of eye diseases that damage the optic nerve. This nerve carries information from the eye to the brain. When the nerve is damaged, you can lose your vision.

Glaucoma is one of the most common causes of legal blindness in the world. At first, people with glaucoma lose side (peripheral) vision. But if the disease isn't treated, vision loss may get worse. It can lead to total blindness over time.

What causes it?

The exact cause of glaucoma isn't known. Experts think that increased pressure in the eye (intraocular pressure) may cause the nerve damage in many cases. But some people who have glaucoma have normal eye pressure.

What are the symptoms?

In open-angle glaucoma, the only symptom you may notice is loss of vision. You may not notice this until it is serious. Symptoms of closed-angle glaucoma can be mild and may last only a short time, such as blurred vision. In childhood glaucoma, symptoms can include watery eyes and sensitivity to light.

How is it diagnosed?

Your doctor will ask you questions about your symptoms and do a physical examination. If your doctor thinks you have glaucoma, you will need to see an eye specialist. The specialist will do an eye examination and measure the pressure in your eyes to check for signs of glaucoma.

How is glaucoma treated?

Glaucoma can't be cured. But there are things you can do to help stop more damage to the optic nerve. To help keep your vision from getting worse, you'll probably need medicine (most likely eye drops) every day. You may also need laser treatment or surgery. You'll also need regular checkups with your eye doctor.

What can you do to cope with glaucoma?

If you have vision loss, there are things you can do to help keep your quality of life.

- Let people know that you have glaucoma. Carry a wallet card or other identification that says that you have glaucoma.
- Find ways to make the best uses of your remaining vision.
 - Use vision aids such as video enlargement systems and large-print items.
 - Place lighting so that it's aimed at what you want to see and aimed away from your eyes.
 - Mark the areas around stairways and ramps with paint or tape.
- Build a support group.
 - It's common to feel sad or angry when you learn that you have glaucoma. Support groups and counselling can also help you deal with vision loss.
 - Your doctor can also refer you to counsellors who specialize in helping people adjust to living with low vision.
- Be careful when you take medicine.
 - Use your glaucoma medicines as prescribed by your doctor.
 - Check with a doctor before you take any over-the-counter medicines if you have closed-angle glaucoma or you are at risk for it.
 - Discuss any medicine side effects with your doctor.
 - Eye medicines can cause symptoms all through the body. Your medicine may need to be changed.
 - Learn how to use eye drops.
 - Using them the right way can help reduce side effects.