

Get tested this week for silent thief of sight

Glaucoma, which is the second leading global cause of blindness is often referred to as the silent thief of sight. As this week (10-16 March 2013) is World Glaucoma Week, take the opportunity to have your eyes tested.

This is a joint initiative of the World Glaucoma Association (WGA) and World Glaucoma Patient Association (WGPA) to raise awareness about this disease, with many people worldwide not realising the severity of the condition or who can be affected. Worse yet, it is estimated that between 50-80% of people with glaucoma do not even know that they have it.

There is usually no pain associated with the increased eye pressure which causes glaucoma. In fact, there may be no symptoms to warn you that you have glaucoma until significant vision is lost. This is because initial vision loss may begin with peripheral or side vision which a person may compensate for by unconsciously turning their head to the side. Vision loss through glaucoma is irreversible, meaning that once vision has been lost, it can never be regained!

The best way to protect against glaucoma is to get tested. If you have glaucoma, treatment can begin immediately. Treatment may be with topical eye drops, laser treatment or surgery to prevent progression of the disease. Glaucoma can be a lifelong condition but with the correct treatment and maintenance, further vision loss can be prevented.

Glaucoma treatment is used to lower eye pressure to prevent optic nerve damage and loss of vision and needs to be taken regularly as directed. It is vital that people diagnosed with glaucoma take their eye drops as prescribed and keep their scheduled follow up visits with their ophthalmologist.

High risk groups

Everyone is at risk for glaucoma. However, certain groups are at higher risk than others. Those at a higher risk include people over 60 years of age, people with family members who have glaucoma, as well as African, Asian or Hispanic population groups. Steroid use or eye injuries can also increase a person's risk as can the presence of hypertension and diabetes.

People at high risk for glaucoma should get a complete eye exam every one to two years. People with no risk factors should get their eyes tested every two to four years if under the age of 45, and thereafter every one to two years, as the risk of glaucoma increases as one ages. People over the age of 65 should have their eyes tested as often as every six months.

A visit to your ophthalmologist is your best bet when wanting a safe and accurate eye test to check for a serious condition such as glaucoma. An ophthalmologist is a medical doctor (the word ophthalmologist comes from the Greek words "ophthalmos" meaning "eye," and "logos" meaning "the study of") who is able to assess eye pressure as well as visualise the

optic nerve and the inner structures of the eye. Ophthalmologists are able to conduct a variety of eye tests, diagnose, prescribe medication and manage patient's eye conditions as well as perform surgery for eye trauma, crossed eyes, cataracts, glaucoma, and other problems.

"I think that it is absolutely necessary for every person after the age of 40 years to have their eyes tested for glaucoma as one person out of every 40 will develop glaucoma. Regular eye testing should be done by an ophthalmologist at regular intervals to diagnose other eye conditions, for example, diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular disease. Remember, we only have two eyes and we should look after them," says Professor Andries Stulting, president of the South African Glaucoma Society (SAGS) and head of the Department of Ophthalmology at the University of the Free State.

A comprehensive glaucoma test is painless and may include examining inner eye pressure, the shape and colour of the optic nerve, the complete field of vision, the angle in the eye where the iris meets the cornea as well as measuring the thickness of the cornea.

There are potentially millions of people globally at risk of losing their vision from glaucoma who may not take action until they have already lost a substantial portion of their sight.

A list of ophthalmologists can be found on the Ophthalmological Society of South Africa's website at www.ossa.co.za or call +27 (0) 12 343 8920.

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