

Are you a statistic?

I was reading some staggering statistics that were published in the journal *Ophthalmology* and by the College of Optometrists in Vision Disorder. The group investigated how often people got their eyes examined for various eye conditions. The results surprised me and I hope that you are not one of the statistics that I'm going to mention. Most patients should have their eyes examined at least once every two years with the exception of children, seniors and patients with specific medical conditions who should see their optometrist more frequently.

The article in *Ophthalmology* focused on seniors (65 years and older) who have glaucoma, macular degeneration or diabetes and determined how often this group of patients had an eye examination. All three of these conditions can result in blindness if not treated promptly or routinely examined for subtle changes. In the sampling, 70% of patients with glaucoma, 65% of patients with macular degeneration (AMD) and only 50% of patients with diabetes had a yearly eye examination by an ophthalmologist or optometrist.

Glaucoma is typically a slow progressive disease relating partly to a fluid imbalance within the eye. There is no cure for glaucoma but there are medical and surgical management strategies to minimize the progression. Any damage to the optic nerve by glaucoma is permanent and treating patients early is the key to maintaining vision. Once a diagnosis is made patients will require at least yearly examinations to conduct specialized tests called visual fields, monitor the pressure and obtain refills on their prescriptions.

Macular degeneration is a retinal condition that can change quite quickly or be very slow and steady since there are two different types of AMD: wet and dry. There is no cure for AMD but there are medical treatments for the wet form and preventative steps for the dry form. With macular degeneration there is a change in the circulation which can cause abnormal blood vessels to form and drusen to be deposited in the eye. This drusen can cause distortion to the vision and/or loss of vision as the drusen grow larger. The abnormal blood vessels are more prone to leakage and blood in the eye may increase the likelihood of scar formation. At least yearly eye exams can detect subtle changes to vision and the retina which could maintain vision and help refer patients for earlier treatment, if necessary.

Diabetes is a systemic condition that can have a significant impact on vision. Diabetic retinopathy is a condition where the small blood vessels in the eye are damaged and start to leak. Like AMD, abnormal blood vessels begin to grow and are more prone to break and more prone to significant scarring. These abnormal vessels can also cause significant changes to the drainage system of the eye and possibly cause an atypical form of glaucoma. The Canadian Diabetes Association recommends that all Type I diabetics have a yearly examination starting no later than 5 years after diagnosis while Type II diabetics should have an eye examination at the time of diagnosis and then every 1 to 2 years depending on the severity of the diabetic retinopathy. Screening for diabetic retinopathy should be performed by an experience professional with interpretation of retinal photographs.

The publication by the College of Optometrists in Vision Disorders focused on school-aged children. They found that nearly 25% of all school-age children may have a vision problem that can affect learning, but only 14% of all children have had a comprehensive eye examination before starting school. In several states it is mandatory that children have a dental examination prior to entering school but there is no requirement for an eye examination despite almost 90% of learning in the early years is visual in nature. Not ensuring that your child can see optimally may become an educational handicap that the child may not overcome in the future. The first few years lay the foundation for learning for the decades to come.

In Ontario, seniors (>65 years) and children (<20 years) are covered for yearly eye examinations by the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP). This means that there shouldn't be any reason why we don't strive for a goal that all children and seniors have a yearly eye examination especially for these 4 groups where yearly preventative eye care could help minimize vision loss or help maximize learning potentials. If you haven't had an eye examination in the last year, consult your optometrist and make vision an important part of your regular health care.