



Maintain Your Eyesight, Maintain Your Independence National Non-profit Provides Free Eye Exams for Seniors

(ARA) –In addition to making it possible to enjoy the things you love such as reading, gardening and golfing, good eye health influences many other aspects of your life, including the ability to live independently as you age.

“Failing eyesight impacts your ability to drive and it may make you more prone to accidents around the house,” says Richard P. Mills, M.D., committee chairman for the Seniors EyeCare Program run by EyeCare America, a public service foundation of the American Academy of Ophthalmology. EyeCare America is a national non-profit organization whose mission is to reduce avoidable blindness and severe visual impairment by raising awareness about eye disease and care and providing access to free medical eye care.

A recent study conducted at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston even found that impaired near-range vision may speed older adults’ mental decline. The study showed that seniors with significant impairment in their near vision showed a steeper decline in mental function over seven years. While the exact reason for this link is unclear, researchers believe that it has to do with the fact that poor close-range vision may limit older adults’ activities and hence contribute to cognitive decline. In addition, a lack of visual stimulation to the brain may affect the workings of nerve cells.

According to EyeCare America, by age 65, one in three Americans has some form of vision impairing eye disease, although most do not know it since there are often no warning symptoms. Many people assume that poor sight is a natural part of growing older; while certain eye problems are associated with growing older, failing sight doesn’t have to be. Most eye diseases are treatable, especially if caught early. “That’s why annual, dilated eye exams are so important in helping seniors preserve their sight,” says Dr. Mills.

Sarah Polsfuss tried to ignore her failing eyesight until it got to the point where she was frustrated by not being able to see well enough to read, take her daily walks or gauge how much salt and pepper she was pouring into her cooking. The 67-year-old Alabama resident contacted EyeCare America and was referred to the Alabama Eye and Cataract Center at HealthSouth where she had surgery to remove her cataracts, saving her from complete blindness. “I can see so good now that I have to pinch myself to know it’s true,” she says.

In addition to cataracts, seniors may also suffer from glaucoma and age-related macular degeneration. Here's a brief look at the most common eye diseases for those 55 and older:

* Cataracts are a leading cause of vision loss among adults 55 and older. In fact, more than half the people over age 65 have some degree of cataract development. Surgery is the only way your eye doctor can remove a cataract.

* Glaucoma, the leading cause of blindness in the United States, affects nearly 3 million people, half of whom don't realize they have it since there are often no warning symptoms. African Americans and Hispanics, people with diabetes, those with a family history of the disease, and people age 60 and older are at greater risk for glaucoma.

* Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is the leading cause of severe vision loss in people 50 years of age and over. About 1.7 million Americans over age 65 have been diagnosed with AMD. About one to two percent have severe vision loss.

“An annual eye exam is extremely important to find these problems early so that individuals can receive prompt treatment, increasing the odds of a good outcome,” says Dr. Mills. EyeCare America's Seniors EyeCare Program (SEP) helps to ensure that all eligible seniors have access to medical eye care and promotes annual, dilated eye exams. SEP raises awareness about age-related eye disease, including cataracts, provides free eye care educational materials and facilitates access to eye care.

People eligible for a referral through the program receive a comprehensive, medical eye exam and up to one year of treatment -- at no out-of-pocket cost -- for any disease diagnosed during the initial exam. EyeCare America's 7,500 volunteer ophthalmologists accept Medicare and/or other insurance reimbursement as payment in full.

To learn more about EyeCare America's public service programs or to see if you, a family member or a friend qualify for a free referral, call (800) 222-EYES (3937) or visit www.eyecareamerica.org.

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