Mohamud A Verjee, MD
Assistant Professor of Family Medicine and
Director of Primary Care and Clinical Skills
Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar

*Checking your family history and seeing an ophthalmologist on a regular basis is a good way to protect vision.*

Before you read this, take 30 seconds to close your eyes and imagine feeling that way for the rest of your life. Everything you do, each day, involves the sense of sight. And although you understand this, you may be one of the many people who take their eyesight, and the eyesight of their children, for granted.

Eye health is often neglected—people don’t think of it until something goes wrong, and from there it becomes a battle to see properly. Yearly eye exams are important for anyone between the ages of two and 18, even if the person can see perfectly.

With regular eye checkups, problems like infections, strabismus (lazy eye or squint), amblyopia (non-functional eye), and astigmatism—when vertical and horizontal focal points fail to line up—can be detected early and treated to avoid problems in the future. After the age of 18, a person only needs a check-up once every two years.

As adults, factors like intense sunlight, sandy air, occupational hazards, and an imbalanced diet can pose threats to vision. Wearing protective eye gear—quality sunglasses in the sun, and safety goggles at work or when playing certain sports such as racquetball—are important preventative measures. Studies reveal mixed results about whether or not sun exposure can degrade vision over time. But if there is any chance that the sun can do long-term damage, it’s better to take the precaution than suffer a partial loss of vision.

Eating a balanced diet is critical to maintaining good vision. In particular, he said, fat-soluble vitamins—A, D, K and E—nourish the tissues of the brain and eyes. Foods rich in vitamin A include carrots, sweet potato, capsicum, spinach, butter, cheese, eggs, and milk.

Another major consideration in the realm of eye health is diabetes. According to the International Diabetes Federation, diabetic retinopathy—when the blood vessels of the eye become leaky—is the leading cause of vision loss in adults of working age (20 to 65 years) in industrialized countries.

Diabetes has become an epidemic in many countries, including Qatar. You can help yourself and your loved ones by adopting a healthy lifestyle and monitoring risk factors as follows: ask your doctor to provide a regular reading of A1C blood sugar levels, blood pressure levels and cholesterol levels. All of these levels, when above normal, impact vascular health, which is key to eye health.

**Age-Related Eye Conditions**

After the age of 40, glaucoma—a disease that damages the main nerve within the eye—becomes more of a threat to eye health. Glaucoma is generally under-diagnosed, and it’s important for people to be aware of a possible family history of the condition. If you ask your parents, grandparents and relatives about their eye health, you will be in a better position to catch this condition early and save your own vision.

Two other age-related conditions are cataracts and macular degeneration. Cataracts are cloudy patches on the lens of the eye and the condition can be corrected. Surgeries to remove the lens and replace it are now common and result
in restored vision. Macular degeneration affects the central line of vision and some treatments may slow its progression—again, it is good to check with your family about this and get regular check ups.

While many people visit an optometrist or optician for prescription lenses, it is also recommended that they go to an ophthalmologist for glaucoma screenings and eye checkups. In addition, a family doctor should always be concerned about eye health. If you take your child to your family doctor and they don’t look at the eyes, ask them to do it.

Finally we arrive where we started: thinking about how much we cherish our eyesight, and how lucky we are to have it. According to the World Health Organization, 45 million people are blind and about 135 million more are visually impaired. Global initiatives exist to reduce this number dramatically, and through the generosity of eye donors, and the work of charities and various eye organizations around the world, the sight of one donor can potentially help eight others.

To learn more about such initiatives, visit: www.operationeyesight.ca/NetCommunity/Page.aspx?pid=244

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