

Smoking and vision loss

Most people know that smoking is not good for your health, but many are surprised to learn that smokers are at an increased risk of vision loss or impairment.

The consequences of smoking are very serious. It can lead to blindness and severely impact on a person's quality of life, affecting driving, reading and recognising faces.

How does smoking cause vision loss?

Cigarettes contain approximately 7,000 chemicals, many of which are cancer-causing substances. When you inhale these chemicals they enter your blood stream and damage your blood vessels throughout your body. Damage to the eye is often irreversible. Stopping smoking, or better still not starting, is one of the easiest things you can do to protect your vision.

Common eye conditions that are caused or sped up by smoking

- **Age-related Macular Degeneration (AMD):** chemicals from cigarettes cause damage to the macula at the back of the eye and affect central vision. This can make tasks like reading, driving, watching television and recognising faces very difficult. It is the leading cause of blindness in Australia. It has no cure, but some treatments can slow down its progression. Smoking is the only modifiable risk factor. Smokers are twice as likely to develop AMD compared to those who don't. They also develop late stage AMD on average 10 years before non-smokers.
- **Cataracts:** this is a clouding of the lens, which makes vision blurry and may lead to blindness if not removed. They usually develop as part of the ageing process. Smokers of 20 or more cigarettes per day are twice as likely to develop cataracts in comparison with people who have never smoked.
- **Diabetic Retinopathy (DR):** may affect anyone with type one or two diabetes. Blood vessels at the back of the eye (retina) are damaged. This may cause splotchy or distorted vision and can eventually lead to blindness. DR has no cure but early diagnosis, treatment and good management of your diabetes can help control it. It is believed that smoking accelerates the development of DR. It is also a risk factor for developing type two diabetes.
- **Contact lens related problems:** people who smoke and wear contact lenses have an increased risk of developing infections and inflammations in the eye, compared to non-smokers. Both these conditions can lead to scarring and possible loss of vision over time.

The eyes of non-smokers are also affected by secondhand smoke. It is a known irritant causing many symptoms including stinging eyes, burning or prickling sensation, watery eyes and redness.

While some of the effects of smoking are reversible, it also causes gradual and permanent damage. The earlier you quit, the better for your eyes and for your health.

Where can I go for more information?

Ask your doctor or eye health professional about having regular eye tests to help detect eye problems as early as possible and prevent vision loss.

For more information on eye health and vision care visit: www.visioninitiative.org.au

For information on how to stop smoking speak to your GP or contact the Quitline: 13 78 48 or visit: www.quit.org.au

Don't delay, Save Your Sight - Get Tested and stop smoking

