



Vision Initiative

A partnership promoting eye health and vision care

Causes of vision loss

Approximately 75 per cent of vision loss is preventable or treatable, and vision impairment in the population increases threefold with each decade over the age of 40. In Australia, 80 per cent of vision loss is caused by five eye conditions. Listed in alphabetical order these are:

Age-related macular degeneration (AMD)

This is a degenerative condition associated with ageing that gradually destroys central vision. Central vision is needed for common tasks such as reading and driving. Treatment is available to help retain remaining vision for some people.

Cataract

Cataract is a clouding of the lens inside the eye. It causes a gradual impairment of vision. Clients may experience increased sensitivity to light when driving and have difficulty finding adequate light and correct lenses for reading. Risk factors for developing cataract are age, ultraviolet light exposure, diabetes, the use of corticosteroids and smoking.

Diabetic retinopathy

This is a disease of the small blood vessels of the retina. Fifteen years after diagnosis, almost half of those with diabetes will have diabetic retinopathy. Early detection and treatment can prevent 98 per cent of severe vision loss.

Glaucoma

This disease gradually damages the optic nerve and results in subsequent vision loss and blindness. It may be associated with increased pressure inside the eye. Early diagnosis and treatment can control the progression of the disease.

Refractive error

Around 22 per cent of Australians have this focusing disorder. It is easily corrected with prescription glasses.

What can health professionals do?

Ask your clients about their vision. Often clients will not associate poor vision with other health outcomes. Vision disorders are often the underlying cause of other health problems.

Impaired vision is linked to an increase in the risk of falls and fractures, depression, early entry to nursing homes and difficulty with daily living tasks. Good vision promotes healthy and independent ageing.

Refer

If you identify a vision problem or are concerned about a person's vision please refer your client to an eye care professional. Regular eye examinations can detect any developing problems and provide the best chance for treatment.

Medicare covers most of the costs associated with visiting an optometrist or ophthalmologist and in some cases it covers 100 per cent.

In Victoria, the Victorian Eyecare Service (VES) assists people with pension and health care cards with the cost of buying spectacles.

For more information, visit the VES website at www.health.vic.gov.au/agedcare/services/ves

Use low vision services

If clients have low vision, refer them to a local low vision centre for advice on services, equipment and training.

Preventing vision loss

Encourage clients to have regular eye examinations if they are over the age of 40. The common eye conditions affecting Australians need to be detected early to allow for the best treatment. Some eye conditions may not be associated with symptoms until the disease process is advanced as seen with glaucoma and diabetic retinopathy.

Refer clients for an eye examination every two years if they are in a high risk group. This includes people with diabetes, a family history of glaucoma or age-related macular degeneration and people of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. If clients experience any changes in their vision they should be referred for an eye examination immediately.

Protecting your patients eyes

Encourage your clients to wear sunglasses and sun hats whenever in the sun.

Advise them to wear eye protection at home and at work when operating machinery, using chemicals or playing sport – and emphasise the importance of anti-smoking programs.

Encourage your patients to access information about their eye health at www.visioninitiative.org.au



Age-related macular degeneration (AMD)

AMD is a degenerative condition that affects central vision. Vision loss begins as distortion of images. Two out of three people will be affected by AMD in their lifetime and vision loss will occur for one in four. Early detection is crucial as treatment is more effective in the early stages.

Tips

- promote anti-smoking programs
- AMD has a genetic link and can run in families
- encourage regular eye examinations



Cataract

Cataract is a clouding of the lens in the eye that causes vision impairment. 31 per cent of people over 55 have cataract. Around 180,000 Australians have cataract surgery each year.

Tips

- promote anti-smoking programs
- encourage wearing of sunglasses and hats when in the sun
- encourage regular eye examinations



Diabetic retinopathy

Of the population over 55 years, 2.8 per cent has diabetic retinopathy. This disease is a complication of diabetes affecting the small blood vessels of the retina. Early diagnosis and treatment can prevent 98 per cent of severe vision loss.

Tips

- encourage eye examinations every two years
- control blood sugar, blood pressure and cholesterol levels



Glaucoma

Glaucoma results in permanent damage to the optic nerve and subsequent vision loss and blindness. Only 50 per cent of people with glaucoma are aware that they have the disease. One in ten people in Australia will develop glaucoma. Glaucoma has a genetic link – people with a family history of the disease are four times more likely to develop glaucoma than the rest of the population.

Tips

- encourage regular eye examinations as early detection and treatment can prevent or delay vision loss



Refractive error

Refractive error is a focusing disorder of the eye. Of the population over 40 years, 22 per cent has refractive error. Over half of vision impairment in Australia can be corrected with the right pair of glasses.

Tips

- encourage regular eye examinations
- promote the Victorian Eyecare Service, which assists people with a pension or health care card with the cost of buying glasses. Visit www.health.vic.gov.au/agedcare/services/ves

A snapshot of vision impairment in Australia

More than half a million Australians are vision impaired and most of the conditions causing this are preventable or treatable.

In Australia, five conditions account for approximately 80 per cent of all vision loss. These are (listed alphabetically) age-related macular degeneration, cataract, diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma and refractive error.

Vision impairment can be reduced through regular eye examinations.

Cause of vision loss in Australians over 40 (2004)

