National Eye Health Week report finds nation's EYE Q is missing the mark & putting millions at risk of avoidable sight loss

Wednesday 21 September, 2022

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One in three of us will suffer sight loss in our lifetime, yet half of this could be avoided.[1]
Routine eye tests, to ensure early detection and treatment of eye conditions, and adopting healthy lifestyles are key to preventing unnecessary sight loss; however, the findings of a new report reveal many of us lack even the most basic 'know-how' when it comes to looking after our vision and eye health.

The Eye Q report, commissioned by Eye Health UK and Thomas Pocklington Trust to mark National Eye Health Week (19–25 September), found just one in four of us rate routine eye tests as important for maintaining good eye health. Worryingly, the report also found more than 17.5million of us haven't had an eye test in the last two years, as recommended; with men and minority ethnic groups most likely to skip this essential health check.

As well as fears about the cost of eye care, the misnomer that 'if your eyes are fine you don't need to have an eye test' was a common reason not getting eyes checked.

The report also uncovered a shocking lack of awareness of 'reg flag' symptoms linked to sight-threatening eye conditions. Despite being symptoms of retinal detachment – a condition requiring urgent treatment to avoid permanent sight loss – only one in five of us (19%) would seek same-day medical attention if we suddenly saw lots of flashes and floaters in our vision, and fewer than half of us (48%) would take urgent action if we saw a shadow, veil or curtain over our vision.

When it comes to understanding how lifestyle can impact risk of sight loss, a meagre eight per cent of us link exercise and eye health despite evidence showing being physically active can slash the risk of visual impairment.[2]

Eighty per cent of us are in the dark about the eye health benefits of eating a nutritionally-balanced diet; just four in 10 (38%) understand exposure to the sun's UV can impact eye health, and, a paltry 13 per cent link smoking and sight loss, even though smoking is a direct cause of sight loss, including macular degeneration – the UK's leading cause of blindness.[3]

Awareness that the menopause can affect eye health was also woefully low, with just 13 per cent of peri- & menopausal women[4]
making a connection between the two, despite 'the change' triggering dry eye and blepharitis, and, increasing the risk of glaucoma and cataracts.

UV protection is vital to prevent poor eye health and future sight loss, however, one in five believe eyes only need protecting on sunny days, when in fact, eyes should be protected whenever the UV index rises to three or more,[5] even if the skies are cloudy, as 90 per cent of UV can transmit through the clouds.[6]

With increasing screen use more and more of us are suffering screen fatigue – headaches, sore or tired eyes and temporary blurring of our vision – because we don't know how to be screen smart. Just one in seven of us follow the 20-20-20 rule [look away from your screen every 20 minutes and focus on something 20 feet away for 20 seconds]; only 28 per cent adjust room lighting and four in five don't consciously blink.

Other misconceptions about factors that can have a negative impact on vision and eye health include:

- 75% of us think it's okay to shower in contact lenses. It's not. Contacts should be removed before showering to prevent water-borne infection.
- 72% of us are unaware of the dangers of using old mascara. Using mascara that's been open for more than three or four months is a common cause of eye irritation and infection.
- 65% of us think reading in dim light could damage our eyes. It won't. It will simply highlight any existing imperfection.
- 56% of us are unaware that rubbing our eyes could be harmful. However, excessive rubbing is linked to keratoconus – a condition that distorts your vision.

With little knowledge about how to care for our eyes and factors that can affect them it's probably no surprise the report found 77 per cent us suffered poor eye health in the last 12 months, whilst more than half of us (52%) say our daily lives have been disrupted by the quality of our vision – affecting our ability to do, or enjoy, daily things like household chores, driving, reading or our hobbies.

The state of our eye health also affected our emotions and mental well-being. Fifty-five per cent of respondents say their vision affected their mental state – leaving them feeling frustrated (24%), anxious (16%) or stressed (13%). The affect of eye health on mental state was particularly prevalent amongst people living with sight loss[7], with 76 per cent saying their vision had affected their mental health.

Commenting on the report David Cartwright, optometrist and chair of Eye Health UK said: "With 60 per cent of us worrying about our long-term vision it's time for us to wise up and learn how to look after our eyes. Making some simple changes to our lifestyle and having regular eye tests could give your eye health a boost and prevent future sight loss."

Mike Bell, Head of Public Affairs and Campaigns at Thomas Pocklington Trust added: "The Eye Q report has revealed how little knowledge there is about the importance of eye health, including amongst people already living with some form of sight loss. Looking after your eyes is just as important as looking after the rest of your body. Regular eye health checks can help prevent or limit the damage done by many eye conditions. They can also help identify the signs of other health conditions like diabetes or high blood pressure. The message is clear, get regular eye health checks and never ignore changes in your vision."

Visit the National Eye Health Week website (visionmatters.org.uk) to check your risk of future sight loss using on the online eye health calculator.

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For further information, copies of the report or to arrange interviews, please contact:

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Notes to editors:

Eye Health UK (registered charity number: 1086146) is the charity responsible for running National Eye Health Week. The Eye Q Report was produced in association with Thomas Pocklington Trust (registered charity number: 1113729).

Five ways to give your Eye Q a boost

Learn about eye tests. What they entail, when you should have them and why they are essential for your eye health and general wellbeing.

Understand how your family's medical history could affect your own eye health and risk of future sight loss. Conditions such as myopia (short-sightedness) and glaucoma have strong genetic links.

Be aware of red flag symptom associated with sight-threatening eye conditions. Conditions like retinal detachment need urgent, often same-day, treatment to prevent or arrest vision impairment.

Appreciate how your lifestyle could be putting you at risk of future sight loss. Consider your diet, exercise regime, smoking status, drinking habits and the amount of time spent outdoors. These can all impact your vision and eye health.

Be screen smart.
Prevent screen fatigue by following the 20-20-20 rule [look up from your screen every 20 minutes and focus on an object 20 feet away for 20 seconds].

The Eye Q Report is based on the findings of a survey conducted by .Yonder Consulting in accordance with MRS guidelines and regulations, on a representative sample of 2,077 UK Adults aged 18+ between 24 – 25 August 2022. All figures quoted in this release are from this study unless otherwise stated.

[1] Source RNIB.

[2] Being physically active can reduce your risk of visual impairment by 58 per cent versus somebody with a sedentary lifestyle.

ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4047137/

[3] *British Medical Journal, Vol. 328, S. 537*

[4] Women aged between 45 and 54 years of age.

[5] *www.epa.gov/sunwise/**uv-index**-scale*

[6] Diffey BL and Larko O, Clinical climatology, 1984

[7] *Self-certified as having sight loss that is not caused by long/short-sightedness or needing reading glasses. Or having an eye-condition such as cataracts, glaucoma, inherited eye conditions and macular degeneration that involves on-going management / treatment or could lead to permanent sight loss. Short-term eye conditions that can be cured or easily corrected (such as conjunctivitis/styes) or conditions that do not affect the eye health or vision (such as colour blindness) were also excluded.*

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