

How You Can Help Stop Irreversible Vision Loss

Eye to Eye

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Glaucoma is one of the leading causes of blindness in the United States. Although it is more prevalent in adults, it can occur at any age. Glaucoma is a group of eye conditions that damage the optic nerve, which is vital to good vision. While an abnormally high pressure in your eye is one of the known variables, there are other factors that contribute to this condition and thus are considered a multifactorial optic neuropathy.

The most common form of glaucoma called Primary Open Angle Glaucoma (POAG) is a chronic, progressive, and irreversible condition. While optic nerve damage in the setting of high intraocular pressure (IOP) is typical, elevated IOP is not necessarily pathognomonic. Many patients demonstrate optic nerve damage despite demonstrating pressure readings within the normal range (10 - 20 mmHg). This subset of glaucoma is called “normal-tension glaucoma.” As well, there are other types of glaucoma such as angle-closure, exfoliative and pigmentary glaucoma. Therefore, pressure measurement alone is not enough to diagnose glaucoma. Careful examination of the optic nerve with a dilated exam, supplemented by other tests if suspicion is high, is necessary.



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While the exact cause of glaucomatous optic nerve damage is not known, elevated IOP has garnered the greatest attention as it is *the one variable* that is amenable to treatment. Other factors include age over 40, family history, race (especially African American ethnicity), myopia, medications such as steroids (any route) and presence of systemic microvascular disease. Still, everyone, even children and young adults, can potentially develop glaucoma. It is estimated that glaucoma is one of the leading cause of irreversible blindness in the United States, second only to macular degeneration.

But unlike macular degeneration which can only be slowed, glaucoma progression can be halted with proper control of IOP in many cases. Generally, chronic topical ocular medications is the solution, but laser treatment as well as minimally invasive surgery with a stent (typically performed in conjunction with cataract surgery) have proven successful in controlling IOP. Recalcitrant stages of glaucoma may require more invasive procedures.

POAG is considered the “silent thief of sight” due to its typically slow and chronic progression rate. It has been shown that some patients can have up to 40% damage of the optic nerve without any signs of vision loss, or even visual field constriction on perimetry testing. When symptoms do arise, it is certainly too late to recover the nerve function lost. Additionally, the weaker the nerve, the more vulnerable it is to even mild IOP elevation which makes halting progression more difficult. The aggressive pressure control required at this late stage often call for multiple topical medications which can make treatment arduous for the patient leading to poor compliance, especially in the elderly.

How can you, as the primary physician, help stop this silent, irreversible condition?

Since early detection is the key, no matter the age or level of visual acuity, recommending an annual routine eye exams with eye doctors in a medical eye practice is the one thing you can do for your patient to impact his/her life in a positive manner. This one simple recommendation coming from “my doctor” can literally be a life-changing event for your patients.