

Daily lives of one million Brits blighted by avoidable sight loss

Submitted by: National Eye Health Week

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Eye health experts today marked National Eye Health Week (18 – 24 September) with a stark warning that a million people in the UK are living with avoidable sight loss severe enough to have a significant impact on their daily lives – leaving them unable to do things such as drive. And worryingly, this number is forecast to rise by a third by 2030, if we don't take action now.[1]

David Cartwright, Chair of National Eye Health Week explains: "Eyesight declines as part of the natural aging process and some cases of sight loss are still sadly unavoidable but for many simply going for regular eyes tests and adopting a healthier lifestyle could prevent sight loss having a significant impact on our lives and help people to live well for longer."

Your lifestyle can impact your eye health regardless of your genetic predisposition.[2] Being physically active has been shown to reduce your risk of visual impairment by 58 per cent versus somebody with a sedentary lifestyle;[3] whilst ditching a diet high in meat – more than 3.5oz daily (the equivalent of two small sausages) – could help cut your risk of cataract.[4]

Research published in the British Medical Journal reveals as many as one in five cases of Age-related Macular Degeneration (AMD), the UK's leading cause of blindness, are caused by tobacco consumption.[5] Making smoking directly responsible for around 120,000 cases of AMD in Britain today.[6]

There is also growing evidence to suggest that what we eat and drink can play a role in triggering the onset and progression of AMD. One research study has shown that eating just one portion of fish a week could reduce your risk of developing AMD by as much as 40 per cent,[7] whilst, heavy drinking (three or more standard drinks per day) has been associated with the development of early AMD.[8]

Poor uptake of regular eye tests, once every two years unless advised otherwise by your optometrist, is also a big risk factor for unnecessary sight loss as the early detection and treatment of common eye conditions like glaucoma is essential to avoid irreversible sight loss.

Almost 14 million (13.8) of us fail to have regular eye tests[9] yet your optometrist can spot signs of glaucoma years before you may notice a change in your vision. In fact, there are an estimated 300,000 people living in the UK with undiagnosed glaucoma because they have not had a recent eye test.[10]

David Cartwright concludes: "Over the next seven days National Eye Health Week will seek to inspire people to make small lifestyle changes that could make a big difference to their future eye health."

National Eye Health Week's six simple sight savers

Quit smoking. Smokers have a significantly greater risk of sight loss than non-smokers. Toxic chemicals in tobacco smoke can damage the delicate surface and the internal structure of the eye. This can lead to an increased risk of many eye conditions including AMD; nuclear cataracts; thyroid eye disease; dry eye and impaired colour vision.

Eat right for good sight. Most of us have no idea that what we eat can affect how well we see, however, eye-friendly nutrients found in many fruit and vegetables and fatty acids derived from fish, nuts and oils can all help protect your sight. Vitamins B and E can help protect against cataracts whilst Omega-3 fish oils help maintain healthy blood vessels inside the eye.

Watch your weight. More than half of all British adults are overweight however maintaining a healthy weight helps preserve macula pigment density, which in turn, helps protect the retina against the breakdown of cells and the onset of AMD. Obesity also puts you at increased risk of diabetic retinopathy and damage to blood vessels in the eye caused by excess body weight has been linked to glaucoma.

Get fit. Aerobic exercise can help increase oxygen supplies to the optic nerve and lower any pressure that builds up in the eye. Reducing intraocular pressure can help control conditions such as glaucoma.

Cover up. Exposure to UV light can increase your risk of developing macular degeneration and cataract. In fact, frequent use of sunglasses has been associated with a 40 per cent decrease in the risk of posterior sub-capsular cataract.[11] Always wear sunglasses when the UV index rises above three and check your sunglasses filter AT LEAST 99 per cent of UVA and UVB light. Look out for a CE or British Standard or UV 400 mark when choosing your sunglasses as this indicates they provide adequate UV protection.

Be screen smart. On average, we spend more than eight hours a day[12] staring at a screen so it's no surprise that 90 per cent of us say we experience screen fatigue – tired or irritated eyes, blurred vision, headaches and poor colour perception. Avoid eye strain by using the 20-20-20 rule, especially if you're using a computer for long periods of time. Look 20 feet in front of you every 20 minutes for 20 seconds.

And, don't forget to book an eye test during National Eye Health Week if you haven't had one in the last two years.

For more information and advice about looking after your eyes visit [<http://www.visionmatters.org.uk>].

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For further information or to arrange interviews, please contact: Rachel Robson National Eye Health Week Press Office Direct line: 01225 463101 Mobile: 07986 056380 Email: rachel@visionmatters.org.uk Twitter: @myvisionmatters

Notes to editors:

About National Eye Health Week

This year's National Eye Health Week takes place 18 – 24 September 2017. The Week aims to raise awareness of the importance of good eye health and the need for regular eye tests for all. It is supported by six official partners Asda Opticians, Central Optical Fund, Fight for Sight, Optrex, OrCam

and Vision Express. Visit www.visionmatters.org.uk for further information about the Week and information on looking after your vision and eye health.

[1] State of the Nation's Eyes Report 2017 [<http://www.rnib.org.uk/state-nation-2017>]

[2] Joint Associations of Diet, Lifestyle, and Genes with Age-Related Macular Degeneration, Kristin J. Meyers et al. *Ophthalmology Journal*, Sept 2015

[3] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4047137/>

[4] <http://ajcn.nutrition.org/content/early/2011/03/23/ajcn.110.004028>

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

[6] Calculated using Macular Society AMD prevalence data

[7] Dietary Fatty Acids and the 5-Year Incidence of Age-related Maculopathy, Brian Chua et al. *Journal of Food Science*

[8] Chong EW, Kreis AJ, Wong TY et al. Alcohol consumption and the risk of age-related macular degeneration: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Am J Ophthalmol* 2008;145:4 707-715.

[9] National Eye Health Week Consumer Study conducted by Atomik Research, in accordance with MRS guidelines and regulations, on a representative sample of 2,002 UK respondents aged 18+ between 24 – 31 August 2016.

[10] International Glaucoma Association (IGA) estimate for Cases of undiagnosed glaucoma in the UK

[11] Delcourt C et al. Light exposure and the risk of cortical, nuclear and posterior subcapsular cataracts: the Pathologies Oculaires Liees a l'Age (POLA) study. *Arch Ophthalmol*, 2000: 118:385-92

[12] https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0024/26826/cmr_uk_2016.pdf