

# Lifestyle and eyes



Professional Excellence in Eye Health



THE COLLEGE OF  
OPTOMETRISTS

# Overview

Your eyes are affected by your lifestyle and health conditions elsewhere in your body. This leaflet highlights the effect your lifestyle and health can have on your eyes. It should not replace information that is given to you by a healthcare professional. If you have any questions about your eyes, please speak to your optometrist.



If you have any concerns about the health of your eyes, please visit your local optometrist. Optometrists are the eye health specialists in the community.

## Smoking

There is good evidence that smoking causes sight loss. Tobacco smoke has up to 4,000 active compounds. Most of these are toxic and potentially damaging to the eyes.

Smokers are up to four times more likely to develop age-related macular degeneration (AMD) than non-smokers. AMD is the leading cause of sight loss in the UK. Macular degeneration is when the macula at the back of your eye becomes damaged. This affects your ability to see detail, such as recognising faces or reading or watching television.

Smokers are also more likely than non-smokers to develop cataracts. Cataract is when the lens inside your eye goes cloudy. It does not always affect your vision in the early stages, but tends to get worse as you get older. If it affects your vision you will need an operation to remove the cataract.

Stopping smoking is the single best thing that you can do for your eyes and to improve your current and future health.

Stopping smoking is the single best thing that you can do for your eyes and to improve your current and future health. Many smokers want to quit, and you do not have to do it alone. In some areas optometrists work with the NHS to provide services to help you quit. Ask your optometrist if they are able to help you in this way or, if not, can point you to someone who can.

We have produced leaflets on macular degeneration and cataracts. Ask your optometrist for a copy, or visit [lookafteryoureyes.org](http://lookafteryoureyes.org) to find out more.

## Nutrition

Although there is no strong evidence about the effect of diet on AMD, eating a wide variety of fruit and vegetables, including dark green leaves, is good for your general health and may support good eye health.

There are lots of dietary supplements on the market which claim to be beneficial for eye health. There is no good evidence that the general population should be taking these supplements.

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One large trial in the USA showed that people with AMD may experience some delay in the progression of the condition if they take certain nutritional supplements. It is not clear whether this is the case in the wider population. However, the National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE) feels that the available clinical evidence is not enough to make any strong recommendations on making changes to your diet or taking nutritional supplements for AMD. Discuss with your optometrist whether or not they may be helpful for you.

You should note that if you smoke or have been exposed to asbestos, you should not take beta carotene.

## Obesity

Maintaining a healthy weight is not only good for your general health, but it is also good for your eyes. People who are overweight are more likely to develop diabetes, which in turn may affect your eyes (see below). They are also more at risk of developing late AMD and cataracts.

Maintaining a healthy weight is also more likely to help you to keep your blood pressure under control. Having high blood pressure can also affect your eyes (see later).

People who have diabetes are more likely to develop cataract than people who do not.

## Diabetes

People who have diabetes are more likely to develop cataracts than people who do not, and some evidence suggests they are also more likely to develop glaucoma. Glaucoma is when the pressure inside your eye damages the optic nerve at the back of your eye. We have produced a leaflet on glaucoma. Ask your optometrist for a copy, or visit **[lookafteryoureyes.org](http://lookafteryoureyes.org)** to find out more.

People who have diabetes may develop diabetic retinopathy. Diabetic retinopathy is when the small blood vessels in your retina leak blood and fluid into the retina. Although this does not affect your vision in the early stages, if it is left untreated it may lead to sight loss.

You can reduce your risk of developing diabetic retinopathy by keeping your blood sugar under control.

With a few exceptions, the NHS arranges for all people who have diabetes and are aged 12 and over to be invited to have screening for diabetic retinopathy. This is to reduce the risk of sight loss, so it is important that you have the screening done if you are eligible. The screening involves putting drops in your eyes to make your pupils larger. You will then have photographs taken of the retina at the back of your eye.

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It is very important that you have this done regularly, as treatment is more effective if diabetic retinopathy is detected early.

Most people will need to have the screening done every year. If you have not been invited to have your retinal screening done within the past 12 months you should speak to your general practitioner (GP) about this.

The retinal screening only checks to see if you have diabetic retinopathy. It does not check for other eye diseases such as cataracts or glaucoma. It is important that you continue to have regular eye examinations with your optometrist to make sure that you can see clearly and comfortably, and also that you have no other eye disease. Your optometrist will tell you how often you should have this done.

### High blood pressure and high cholesterol

Hypertension (high blood pressure) and high cholesterol increase your risk of having a stroke. They also increase your risk of having a blood vessel at the back of your eye bleed or become blocked. Having hypertension or a diet high in fat also increases your risk of developing late AMD.

Having high blood pressure also increases your risk of developing glaucoma. Glaucoma is when the pressure inside your eye damages the optic nerve at the back of your eye.

A stroke happens when a blood vessel in your brain bleeds or becomes blocked. This can affect your vision if it is in the part of the brain that you use to see with. It can cause blind spots in your vision that may mean that you have problems reading, are no longer able to drive, and you may bump into things.

If a blood vessel at the back of your eye bleeds or becomes blocked this may seriously affect your vision and in some cases lead to total sight loss in one eye.

Having high blood pressure also increases your risk of developing glaucoma.

## Sunshine

Prolonged exposure to ultraviolet (UV) light has been linked to certain eye conditions, including cataracts, and there may be a link between exposure to UV light and AMD. If you spend lots of time outdoors, you should protect your eyes from the sun. You can do this by wearing a hat with a brim and by wearing well-fitting sunglasses that you bought from a reputable retailer and which carry the CE mark. This is the manufacturer's assurance that the sunglasses have been made according to the appropriate safety standards.

If you spend lots of time outdoors, you should protect your eyes from the sun.



## Screen use

Many people worry that looking at a screen, such as a computer, tablet or mobile phone, may damage their eyes. There is no evidence that looking at screens will cause your eyes any harm. Looking at something on a screen has advantages over looking at something on paper - the contrast is good and can be altered, and you can make the print bigger. However, you need to make sure that the reflections from the screen do not get in the way of what you are looking at.

Some people find that looking at a screen for a long time is tiring. To give your eyes a rest, we recommend the 20:20:20 rule. This means that every 20 minutes you should look at something about 20 feet away for about 20 seconds. Although this is only a guide, it does remind you to take regular (short) breaks from screen use.

Because looking at a screen for a long time can be quite demanding for your eyes, you may find that you may need to wear glasses for prolonged screen use, even if you don't need them for regular use. Your optometrist will be able to advise you on this.

There is no evidence that looking at screens will cause your eyes any harm.

**For more information, please talk to your local optometrist.**

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The College of Optometrists is the professional body for optometry. We provide qualifications, guidance and development opportunities for the profession to make sure optometrists provide the best possible care. Our members use MCOptom or FCOptom after their name. Membership of the College shows their commitment to the very highest clinical, ethical and professional standards. Look for the letters MCOptom or FCOptom to see if your optometrist is a member.

Please visit **[lookafteryoureyes.org](http://lookafteryoureyes.org)**  
for more information.

This information should not replace advice that your optometrist  
or other relevant health professional gives you.

Your local optometrist

If you would like this leaflet  
in large print, please email  
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