



ElderCare Q&A

Free Eye Exams For Seniors

Q: Can I get a free eye exam for cataracts or other eye diseases?

A: Yes, a group called EyeCare America has a program called "Give the Gift of Sight" campaign, which offers seniors with no-cost medical eye exams and eye care.

The Seniors EyeCare Program ensures that every senior has access to medical eye care. The group promotes annual, dilated eye exams. It raises awareness about age-related eye disease, including cataracts, provides free eye care educational materials and access to eye care-at no out-of-pocket cost to you.

Important note: eyeglasses, prescription drugs, hospital services, and fees of other medical professionals are not included in this program. This is a screening that looks at possible eye diseases.

This is important because by age 65, one in three Americans has some form of vision impairing eye disease. Most people don't know it because there are often no warning symptoms. Seniors may assume that poor sight is a natural part of growing older. But by detecting and treating eye disease early through annual, dilated eye exams, you can help preserve your sight.

The Seniors EyeCare Program is designed for people who:

- Are U.S. citizens or legal residents
- Are age 65 and older
- Have not seen an ophthalmologist in three or more years
- Do not belong to an HMO or the VA

If you are found eligible for a referral through this program, you will receive a comprehensive, medical eye exam, plus up to one year of care - at no out-of-pocket cost - for any disease diagnosed during the initial exam. The tests are done by volunteer ophthalmologists who are willing to accept Medicare and/or other insurance reimbursement as payment in full. If you have no insurance coverage, you will receive care at no charge.

EyeCare America offers a number of eye care programs for which you may qualify. When you call the group's toll-free number, the call screeners will determine which program provides the most appropriate eye care services. If you have not had an eye exam in the past 12 months and are considered to be at increased risk for glaucoma, you may be eligible for a glaucoma eye exam through the Glaucoma EyeCare Program.

EyeCare America also screens for Age-related Macular Degeneration (AMD), which is the leading cause of vision loss in people 65 years or older in the United States. AMD affects more than 10 million Americans. Macular degeneration refers to the breakdown of the macula of the eye, where our sharpest central vision occurs. A person with macular degeneration may be able to see a clock on a wall, but not see the numbers, or walk into a room, but not without bumping into furniture. Words may look blurred and straight lines may appear crooked.

Recent studies also show that eating foods rich in antioxidants such as lutein, zeaxanthin, omega-3 fatty acids, beta carotene, vitamin C, vitamin E and zinc, may reduce the risk of AMD, or slow its progression in some people. EyeCare America has developed a cookbook called Feast Your Eyes on This! which includes eye healthy recipes from celebrity chefs from across the United States. The complete cookbook is available for free online at www.eyecareamerica.org.

According to EyeCare America, as the "baby boomers" age, America will see a virtual epidemic of AMD. The National Eye Institute estimates there are as many as 17 million Americans with moderate to severe AMD. To find out if you, a family member or a friend qualify for a free eye exam call 1-800-222-EYES (3937) toll-free, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. EyeCare America is a non-profit organization staffed by 7,000 volunteer ophthalmologists.