

Importance of glaucoma screening

In the modern era of health promotion and prevention we are schooled in the screening of the silent causes of mortality and morbidity in our society. This includes a range of conditions, from breast and prostate cancer to cholesterol and high blood pressure. What about glaucoma; do we put the same sort of emphasis on its detection at a primary care level?

Glaucoma progressively and irreversibly damages the optic nerve. It remains the most preventable cause of vision loss in the Western World and affects more than 250,000 Australians. Many people are unaware of its existence or the need for regular screening to detect what is essentially a silent condition. By the time any patient seeks medical help



Glaucoma screening starts at age 50, particularly in those without glasses, and sooner if there is a family history.

because of overt clinical symptoms, much of the nerve has been irreversibly lost.

Glaucoma specialists and ophthalmologists see too often, patients whose glaucoma is very advanced at the time of diagnosis. For these patients, remaining optic nerve function is often unlikely to outlast them, with inevitable severe visual impairment and all its untoward consequences.

Not all glaucoma is blinding. Most cases can be adequately treated with a combination of topical therapy, lasers and surgery. Non-surgical management is the norm in more than 90% of cases. However, the key is to make the diagnosis in the first instance.

Patients at high risk include:

- Those with a strong family history of glaucoma (increases the risk 6-8 times),
- Very short-sighted patients (doubles the risk), and
- People without a need for glasses (and therefore no regular eye examinations) or those without access to eye care.

The last group are emerging as the greatest concern as the first two groups tend to head to an eye care professional sooner rather than later, resulting in earlier detection.

Glaucoma needs to be included in the



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Take Home Clinical Points

- Only narrow angle glaucoma presents acutely. These cases make up the minority of cases (less than 1%).
- Most cases of glaucoma that are damaging to vision are asymptomatic or symptoms are so minor as to be non-diagnostic.
- Glaucoma screening is simple, non-invasive and can be done in a few minutes.
- To prevent blindness from glaucoma remind patients about regular eye checks, particularly those without glasses or a strong family history.

comprehensive list of health checks our patients undertake as they age. Screening should start at age 40 in higher risk patients or age 50 in others and be done every two years.

The most accessible and accurate screening is simple, relatively inexpensive and can be done by an ophthalmologist or an optometrist as part of a general eye check.

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