



These Lens Can't Be Wiped Clear

BY DEAN PORTER, M.D. - OPHTHALMOLOGIST

I scanned the top of the patient's chart to identify the reason for the office visit: "blurred vision, difficulty reading". While this may just mean glasses are in order, all too often another condition is present. And all too often it means that another condition has advanced to the point of causing symptomatic visual loss long after an eye exam would have detected it.

The "big three" such conditions are cataract, macular degeneration, and glaucoma. Think of the eye as a sophisticated camera. Cataract is a clouding of the lens, residing inside the eye behind the colored iris. As the lens opacifies, vision gradually blurs and sometimes glare, which is particularly caused by oncoming headlights at night, and becomes more bothersome. We all develop cataract with age, most often in our sixties or later. That's right; if you live long enough you will develop cataract, so don't be surprised. The development of cataract is typically slow, taking years or even decades to pro-

duce symptoms. Thanks to modern surgical techniques cataract may be cured by its removal in a brief outpatient procedure that allows rapid improvement in vision and return to normal activities. Patients undergoing cataract surgery additionally benefit from reduction, or in some cases, elimination of their need for glasses or contact lenses. Cataract surgery is truly amazing in its potential to rapidly improve vision.

A second common condition is macular degeneration. This affects the central retina, which is analogous to the film in a camera. Although macular degeneration may cause severe, debilitating visual loss, it does not cause complete blindness. Macular degeneration is most commonly seen in people age 55 and older and affects approximately one third of adults over the age of 75. Macular degeneration may be wet or dry. The more common dry variety causes a gradual decline in central vision, the vision most important for driving and reading, usually over many years. Wet degeneration may cause similar vision loss in a much

more rapid fashion over a period of days or weeks. Both genetic and environmental factors appear to be involved in causing macular degeneration. While the genetic factors are not treatable at present, environmental factors may be modified. Sunglasses that protect against ultraviolet light and not smoking are a good start. A diet rich in green leafy vegetables, and vitamin supplements in more advanced degeneration, appear to be helpful. Research has recently improved treatment for wet degeneration. New medications may stabilize or even improve vision.

Called the "sneak thief of sight," glaucoma is the third, and potentially the most serious of the common conditions. Glaucoma is a degenerative condition of the optic nerve, which is similar to a cable linking the eye to the brain. This disease may cause progressive and permanent visual loss, leading to total blindness in the most severe cases. The course of glaucoma is highly variable, and may affect individuals of any age. Many factors predispose to glaucoma, including el-

evated eye pressure, family history, eye trauma, age 60 or older, and physical or anatomical variations of the eye. Persons of African genetic ancestry are approximately five times more likely to develop glaucoma than the general populace. Most people with mild to moderate glaucoma will not have any symptoms. Although glaucoma is not curable or reversible in most cases, eye drops, laser, and surgical treatments are effective in slowing or halting the progression of disease.

Well, it is time to examine my patient. Regardless of what I find, the important point is that this patient isn't taking good vision for granted. If it has been more than a couple of years, someone in your family has one of these eye diseases, or things are just getting a little blurry, do your eyes a favor and schedule a complete eye exam with an eye care professional.

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