



# Eye on Health

## Eye Disease On The Rise Among Older Americans, Few Realize Risk

(NAPSA)—According to a recent national health survey, most Americans are unaware of the risks associated with age-related eye diseases—despite a projected 65 percent spike in those conditions by the year 2020. Overall, most Americans rank blindness and vision loss relatively low on their list of health concerns.

The survey, conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, finds that only 11 percent of Americans perceive themselves at high risk for eye disease. While Americans age 65 and over are the most at-risk population, only 10 percent believe they are personally at risk and more than a third of those in this age group do not even get annual eye examinations.

Another high-risk group, those with a family history of eye disease, knows strikingly little about specific risk factors and is no more likely to get screened than people without a family history of eye disease. Only 15 percent of all respondents were correctly able to identify half or more factors from a list of risk factors for age-related macular degeneration, cataracts, diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma and dry eye.

To that end, the American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO)—the world's largest association of eye physicians and surgeons—is issuing a new eye disease screening recommendation for aging adults and is launching a new public initiative called EyeSmart to educate Americans about the risks they face.

Age-related eye diseases are expected to dramatically increase—from 28 million today to 43 million by the year 2020. Left untreated, these diseases can



**Many Americans are unaware of the risk factors for age-related eye diseases.**

cause serious vision loss and blindness. At the heart of this upsurge lie America's 78 million baby boomers, who will increasingly face the effects of eye diseases as they get older.

Despite these statistics, Americans remain relatively unconcerned about vision loss. The survey reveals that less than a quarter of Americans (23 percent) are very concerned about losing their vision, while a majority feel weight gain or joint and back pain are of greater concern than vision loss.

"The stark reality is that millions of people will suffer significant vision loss and blindness because they don't know the risks," said H. Dunbar Hoskins Jr., M.D., executive vice president of the AAO. "We're taking action against this pending epidemic by educating the American public on the steps they can take to prevent vision loss and blindness."

AAO now recommends a baseline eye disease screening for everyone at age 40. Much like regular mammograms and diabetes screenings, eye disease screenings

will help identify signs of disease at an early stage, when treatment is likeliest to have its greatest impact. AAO also recommends that individuals at risk of eye disease see their ophthalmologist, who will develop an individualized schedule of exams to closely monitor potential disease progression.

EyeSmart will support the new eye health recommendations by empowering individuals and families to take charge of their eye health. AAO is partnering with EyeCare America, a program of the Foundation of the American Academy of Ophthalmology, on the effort. The EyeSmart Web site, [www.geteyesmart.org](http://www.geteyesmart.org), delivers eye disease and risk information and a searchable database of local ophthalmologists.

EyeSmart aims to reach people who don't traditionally consider themselves at risk, such as individuals who do not wear glasses or contacts. The survey revealed that 96 percent of individuals without glasses or contacts do not think they are at high risk for eye disease. Wearing glasses or contacts has no impact on contracting age-related eye diseases.

"The fact is that everyone is at risk. More than half of all Americans will have some form of eye disease as they get older," Dr. Hoskins said. "We believe that if Americans know their risks, they will take the steps necessary to maintain good eye health. We want Americans to get EyeSmart to help reduce severe vision loss and blindness."

To learn more about the EyeSmart campaign, visit the Web site at [www.geteyesmart.org](http://www.geteyesmart.org). For additional information about AAO, visit [www.aao.org](http://www.aao.org).