

ROAD TO SAFETY

Elderly Drivers May Be Blindsided By Eye Disease

(NAPSA)—As the first wave of the Baby Boom generation washes up against the reality of being senior citizens, the debate continues about limiting the driving privileges of older Americans, although elderly drivers tend to be more cautious and observant of rules of the road.

But age—specifically, aging eyes—can play a factor in driving ability, said Reza Haque, M.D., spokesman for Novartis Ophthalmics North America, maker of Visudyne® (verteporfin for injection), a treatment for a certain form of wet age-related macular degeneration (AMD). “Senior citizens are affected by some eye diseases that steal sight so gradually that people literally do not realize they have ‘black holes’ in their field of vision.”

Studies have shown that, after a certain age, a person’s driving abilities can become diminished. Although some states require elderly drivers to take eye exams before renewing their licenses, not all do. “However,” says Haque, “comprehensive eye exams are the only way to detect the initial stages of serious eye diseases like glaucoma and age-related macular degeneration.

“AMD and glaucoma do not necessarily manifest themselves by any signs or symptoms,” said Haque. “They gradually steal our vision until it is too late to salvage it. These diseases affect older people who might not be aware they are at risk. These people literally do not realize they are going blind, but both of these diseases—if caught early—can be treated and managed.”

AMD, the number one cause of blindness in people over the age of



Age-related eye disease can make it dangerous for some older Americans to continue driving.

50, is a disease of the retina. Because it usually starts in one eye, the other eye compensates for the loss of vision. “A driver can have central vision loss,” says Haque, and not realize it. “Central vision is the vision responsible for our everyday needs like driving a car, recognizing faces, reading and watching television.”

There are two forms of AMD, the wet form and the dry form. The wet form is the most devastating because loss of vision can occur very rapidly, even within months.

Glaucoma is caused by increased pressure in the eye, which eventually can cause blindness if it is not treated. Unlike AMD, glaucoma affects the peripheral vision or side vision in its beginning stages. According to the Glaucoma Research Foundation, glaucoma is six to eight times more common in African-Americans than in Caucasians.

“Both AMD and glaucoma must be managed in order to preserve as much vision as possible,” said Haque. “That is why it is imperative for seniors to have regular eye exams, especially if they are going to be operating a vehicle.”