

# “My Eyes Are Fine. Why Get an Exam?”



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**If you're like many people, the idea of visiting an eye care professional probably doesn't enter your mind unless you need a new eyewear prescription or have a worrisome symptom, such as double vision or eye pain. But an eye health examination has a broader function than to merely generate a prescription.**

***The fact is that some eye diseases have no symptoms and cause no change in vision. The resulting loss of eyesight can happen so gradually that many people are not even aware of it until the condition is difficult or impossible to treat. Other eye diseases trigger symptoms that are deceptively ordinary; they might lead you to believe that all you need is new eyeglasses.***

**You can protect your eyesight by having regular comprehensive eye health exams, just as you prevent dental problems by routinely having your teeth cleaned and examined.**

## **Looking Through “Windows”**

Eyes are often referred to as our “windows to the world.” For eye care professionals, they can also be windows into a patient’s health. When your eyes are dilated during the exam, the provider can examine tiny blood vessels in the eyes, which can reveal clues about eye health as well as overall health.

As we get older, we become more vulnerable to eye diseases. In middle age, early signs of glaucoma or diabetic retinopathy may appear. In later life, cataracts or age-related macular degeneration may develop. Early diagnosis through a comprehensive eye exam is essential to preserving eyesight. Treatment can begin immediately, delaying or halting its progression.

A comprehensive eye health exam can also uncover early signs of a systemic condition, such as diabetes, elevated cholesterol levels, high blood pressure, arteriosclerosis, brain tumors, AIDS, multiple sclerosis, neurological impairments, thyroid disease and vitamin deficiencies. Discovery of such valuable information during a routine eye exam enables the patient to obtain early treatment.



## What to Expect During an Eye Health Exam

You may be familiar with a routine vision screening, which is used to determine if prescription eyewear is needed. Most people must pass a screening in order to get a driver's license. It is also a part of your child's annual physical, or your child may be screened in school. Vision screenings, however, measure only visual acuity, not eye function, and cannot diagnose an eye disease or disorder. In contrast, a comprehensive eye health exam evaluates all parts of the eye to ensure that they are healthy.

Here is what you may expect when you visit your eye care provider for a comprehensive eye health exam:

- **Health review.** The optometrist or ophthalmologist will ask about your current and past health, family medical history and if you're currently experiencing any eye symptoms.
- **Visual acuity.** Using an eye chart, the doctor tests your visual acuity at both near and far distances.
- **Refraction.** The doctor places an instrument called a phoropter in front of your eyes and shows you a series of lens choices in order to find the exact prescription, if any, that you need.
- **Visual field test.** The doctor checks your peripheral (side) vision for blind spots. Their presence may indicate an eye disease or even brain damage caused by a stroke or tumor.
- **Glaucoma test.** A tonometer is used to rule out glaucoma, a disease that affects the optic nerve. Often using a puff of air, the test is administered to each eye to measure its internal pressure.
- **Slit-lamp evaluation.** A powerful microscope called a slit lamp magnifies your eyes so the doctor can examine how its different parts are functioning. Both the front and back of each eye are studied.
- **Dilation.** Exams should include dilation when professionally indicated. The doctor dilates each eye with drops to enlarge the pupil and provide a more detailed view of the back of your eye.

## Your Children's Eyes

Regular eye health exams are important for children as well as adults. Up to age 12, 80% of learning takes place visually. Untreated or uncorrected eye problems can affect school performance, social development and even self-esteem.

Don't expect your child to tell you if he or she has a vision problem; often children don't know what they are supposed to be seeing. Vision screenings alone are not enough. They miss eye problems in one-third of the children who are screened. Additional eye functions, including eye movement skills, hand-eye coordination, focusing ability, peripheral awareness and how eyes work together, are tested in a comprehensive exam.

Regular eye exams are important for everyone. Most eye problems can be prevented or successfully treated with routine vision care.

Sources: AllAboutVision.com, Optometric Management Magazine, Transitions Academy, London Times Online

