



Pharmacy Self Care Health Facts Column

By John Bell - 6 September 2008

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A new angle on the use of eye drops

Almost all of us will have used eye drops from time to time – perhaps to relieve the red eye effects of smoke or other pollutants, or the itchy eye problems associated with hayfever or maybe even to overcome the dry eye symptoms that are part of the ageing process.

And using eye drops is not too difficult is it? Well, usually not – that is unless your sight depends on it. The condition known as glaucoma, which is the leading cause of blindness in Australia, can most often only be managed with regular, generally daily or twice daily, use of drops. Remembering to use drops routinely and using them properly can sometimes be quite a challenge.

Glaucoma is the name given to a group of eye diseases where the optic nerve at the back of the eye is damaged. The damage is caused when pressure in the eyeball rises due to a build up of fluid. This fluid build-up takes place because either too much fluid is formed or the canals in the eye, which normally drain the fluid away, don't work properly.

The discovery of the disease called glaucoma dates back to the 17th century, though the Greek origins of the word glaucoma appear in writings as early as 400BC. The significance of glaucoma as a cause of blindness became known during the 19th century and an understanding of its cause and treatment in the 20th century. Now up to date information about glaucoma is available by way of the new *Vision Impairment* fact card available from pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care health information.

Unfortunately, glaucoma can't be cured. Once there is damage to the nerve cells in the eye, repair is not possible. However, the serious consequences of glaucoma can be prevented if the condition is discovered soon enough; and early treatment, usually with eye drops to stabilise the pressure in the eye, can help avoid further loss of sight.

So, if your sight is hazy or blurred and your eyes difficult to focus, then you should definitely focus your attention on National Glaucoma Week, August 17-23. You can get more information at the Glaucoma Australia website: www.glaucoma.org.au

Glaucoma is very much a family affair. If someone in your family has or had glaucoma you're almost three times more likely to have glaucoma yourself. And that risk increases as you get older.

You are also at greater risk of getting glaucoma if you have diabetes or high blood pressure, if you are short-sighted or if you get migraine headaches.

In the early stages of glaucoma, most people experience no symptoms, even when losing their sight. Nevertheless, there are sometimes warning signs. Some people may notice a need to change their glasses more often, perhaps find it hard to see in dark rooms, lose wide vision, or have blurred sight.

The only way to prevent complete loss of vision is early detection and treatment.

There are several ways to check if you have glaucoma. Your eye specialist or optometrist can measure the pressure of the fluid in your eye; the nerves and blood vessels in your eye can be checked for damage; and your fields of vision can be tested for blind spots or sight loss.

If there is a history of glaucoma in your family, have an eye examination before you reach the age of 35; and from then on, every two years – more frequently if your doctor or optometrist suggests.

If you are using eye drops to treat glaucoma, make sure you know how your eye medicines work so as to get the most benefit from them. Ask your pharmacist for the Self Care fact card; and there is some special information on glaucoma which your pharmacist can print out for you. It also gives some helpful hints on how eye drops should be applied.

For the location of the "Self Care" pharmacy nearest you, call the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 772.