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Low Vision

Vision changes with age and, while some of these changes are normal, some are caused by age related eye conditions and need to be monitored.

Have you noticed that your vision has changed as you've grown older? Because we live longer today, approximately 21 million people in America are affected by some form of visual impairment.

Normal changes in the aging eye include presbyopia, cataracts and the need for more light. Presbyopia is the loss of focus which usually starts at about age 35-40. Cataracts cause declining sensitivity when the lens in our eye becomes more dense and yellow. The need for more light as we age is normal and can be improved by using high definition lighting.

Conditions that are not part of the normal aging process are macular degeneration, glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, and retinitis pigmentosa, to name a few. These diseases can affect central vision, peripheral vision or both. When these diseases affect our vision to the point where it cannot be corrected with glasses, contacts, surgery or medications, it is called low vision.

Some optometrists and ophthalmologists take a special interest in low vision; in many regards, it has become a mini-specialty of its own. With more and more people suffering from macular degeneration and other such diseases, the demand for low vision services continues to increase. Fortunately, technology is working to keep pace with the growing demand.

Modern technology has changed the treatment and care of low vision and can make tasks in the home easier. With low vision treatment, the remaining vision can be maximized by the use of devices such as telescopes, magnifiers, special glasses, CCTV (Closed Circuit Television) and high definition lighting.

The following are some suggestions to consider which may help improve vision related tasks in the home:

- Special reading stands, needle threaders, devices that tell when a glass or coffee cup are getting full, talking alarm clocks, watches and calculators and weight scales.

- Good lighting that is positioned properly between one's face and the object one is viewing. Also, extra lights in closets, cupboards and stair cases. Paint the top and last step in a staircase a bright color or use bright fluorescent tape on each step.
- Use contrasting colors as much as possible. In the kitchen, dishes could be a different color than the table or counter top and light switches a different color than the wall. It is helpful to mark the most common settings on the stove with bright markers or finger nail polish, for example 350° red and 450° yellow.
- Use plates that are a different color than the food such as oatmeal in a black bowl or coffee in a white cup.
- Eliminate small rugs that can easily be tripped over.
- If it is hard to see food on a plate, use the clock method such as put beans at 7 o'clock and meat at 5 o'clock.
- In the bathroom use magnifying mirrors, colored toothpaste or float a bright colored sponge in the bath tub to see water level, use colored soap so it is easy to find. Also, use fluorescent tape on the edge of the bath tub.
- Throw out old medication so the wrong one is not used. Use thick black markers to mark each bottle with an 'A' or 'B'. Have a large print list of what each letter stands for such as 'A' – blood pressure pills and 'B' – heart medication.
- In your bedroom have a night light on and a flash light by your bed.
- In your office use computer software that allows for size control of the print. Have at least a 21 inch monitor and use 18-24 font. Use large checks available at your bank or check templates.
- Books on tape are also available from services for the blind and visually impaired.

Lastly, know what you can do to keep your eyes healthy. Every year, schedule an eye exam with your ophthalmologist or optometrist. Early detection for any disease is critical. If, however, you do suffer from low vision, seek help and advice from a trained low vision specialist.