

# Health Chronicle

For Members of



## Your Aging Eyes How You See as Time Goes By

You may barely notice the changes at first. Maybe you've found yourself reaching more often for your glasses to see up close. You might have trouble adjusting to glaring lights or reading when the light is dim. You may even have put on blue socks thinking they were black. These are some of the normal changes to your eyes and vision as you age.

As more Americans head toward retirement and beyond, scientists expect the number of people with age-related eye problems to rise dramatically. You can't prevent all age-related changes to your eyes. But you can take steps to protect your vision and reduce your risk for serious eye disease in the future. Effective treatments are now available for many disorders that may lead to blindness or visual impairment. You can also learn how to make the most of the vision you have.

"Vision impairment and blindness are among the top five causes of disability in older adults," says Dr. Cynthia Owsley, an eye researcher at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Vision changes can make it difficult to perform everyday activities, such as reading the mail, shopping, cooking, walking safely, and driving. "Losing your vision may not be life-threatening, but it certainly affects your quality of life," Owsley says.

The clear, curved lens at the front of your eye may be one of the first parts of your body to show signs of age. The lens bends to focus light and form images on the retina at the back of your eye. This flexibility lets you see at different distances—up close or far away. But the lens hardens with age. The change may begin as early as your 20s, but it can come so gradually it may take decades to notice.

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# HVA Supports Healthy Vision Around the World

Every year, Healthy Vision Association sponsors a variety of charitable organizations. Here is a list of the organizations we currently, and are continuing to, sponsor.

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- **Prevent Blindness** – <http://www.preventblindness.org>
- **Optometry Giving Sight** – <http://www.givingsight.org>
- **America's VetDogs** – <http://www.vetdogs.org>
- **Himalayan Cataract Project** – <http://www.cureblindness.org>
- **The Seeing Eye** – <http://www.seeingeye.org>
- **United States Association of Blind Athletes (USABA)** – <http://www.usaba.org>
- **Eye Care Charity of Mid-America (ECCOMA)** – <http://www.eccoma.org>
- **Macula Vision Research Foundation** – <http://www.mvrf.org>
- **Children's Center for the Visually Impaired (CCVI)** – <http://www.c cvi.org>
- **Guiding Eyes for the Blind** – <http://www.guidingeyes.org>
- **Team Activities for Special Kids (TASK)** – <http://www.tasksports.org>
- **Mercy Ships** – <http://www.mercyships.org>
- **Delta Gamma Center for Children with Visual Impairments** – <http://www.dgckids.org>
- **1Touch Project** – <http://www.1touchproject.com>
- **ARCHS FBO Kids Vision for Life** – <http://www.kidsvisionforlifestlouis.com>
- **Unite for Sight** – <http://www.uniteforsight.org>
- **Folsom Project for the Visually Impaired**
- **UMSL College of Optometry Curators of the University of Missouri**
- **MUOT Tiger OT Low Vision Program**

HVA is very fortunate to have an extremely impressive board of directors. Their real world success and experience and their overall commitment and care have been pivotal to the growth and success of HVA. Please feel free to visit the membership site for more information on the individuals that make up the board of the Healthy Vision Association.

## Your Aging Eyes, *continued from page 1*

Eventually, age-related stiffening and clouding of the lens affects just about everyone. You may have trouble focusing on up-close objects, a condition called presbyopia. Anyone over



age 35 is at risk for presbyopia.

“You might find you’re holding your book farther away to read it. You might even start thinking your arms just aren’t long enough,” says Dr. Emily Chew, a clinical researcher at

NIH’s National Eye Institute. “A good and simple treatment for presbyopia is reading glasses.”

Cloudy areas in the lens, called cataracts, are another common eye problem that comes with age. More than 24 million Americans have cataracts. By age 75, more than half of us will have had them. Some cataracts stay small and have little effect on eyesight, but others become large and interfere with vision. Symptoms include blurriness, difficulty seeing well at night, lights that seem too bright and faded color vision. There are no specific steps to prevent cataracts, but tobacco use and exposure to sunlight raise your risk of developing them. Cataract surgery is a safe and common treatment that can restore good vision.

The passage of time can also weaken tiny muscles that control your eye’s pupil size. The pupil becomes smaller and less responsive to changes in light. That’s why people in their 60s need three times more light for comfortable reading than those in their 20s. Smaller pupils make it more difficult to see at night.

Trouble seeing at night can affect many daily activities, including your ability to drive safely. Loss of peripheral vision increases your risk for automobile accidents, so you need to be more cautious when driving.

“Keeping older adults active and on the road as drivers, as long as they’re safely able to do so, is considered important to their health and psychological well-being,” says Owsley. But she notes that tests for motor vehicle licenses tend to focus on visual acuity—how well you can read the letters on an eye chart.

“Visual acuity tests may not be the best way to identify drivers at risk for crashes,” she says. “Other issues are also important, like contrast sensitivity, your peripheral vision and your visual processing speed—how quickly you can process visual information and make decisions behind the wheel.”

Owsley and her colleagues measured car crashes among a group of 2,000 drivers, 70 years old and older, over a period of three years. They found that a reduced field of vision and slowed processing speed both increased collision risk. Their research is helping to identify screening tests that can better predict safe or dangerous driving.

If you’re not convinced you should have regular eye exams, consider that some of the more serious age-related eye diseases—like glaucoma, age-related macular degeneration (AMD) and diabetic eye disease—may have no warning signs or symptoms in their early stages.

Glaucoma comes from damage to the optic nerve. “Glaucoma can slowly steal your peripheral vision. You may not notice it until it’s advanced,” says Chew. It can be treated with prescription eye drops, lasers, or surgery. If not treated, however, it can lead to vision loss and blindness.

AMD causes gradual loss of vision in the center of your eyesight. “AMD is the leading cause of blindness in Americans over age 65,” says Chew.

A large NIH-supported clinical study by Chew and others found that a specific combination of vitamins and minerals can prevent AMD from progressing to a more severe form. Scientists also found that people who eat diets rich in green, leafy vegetables—such as kale and spinach—or fish are less likely to have advanced AMD. A large study of 4,000 AMD patients failed to show a benefit from fish oil supplements. However, vitamin/mineral supplements—especially those containing lutein and zeaxanthin, which are found in green leafy vegetables—slows progression to vision-threatening late AMD.

Diabetic eye disease, another leading cause of blindness, can damage the tiny blood vessels inside the retina. Keeping your blood sugar under control can help prevent or slow the problem.

The only way to detect these serious eye diseases before they cause vision loss or blindness is through a comprehensive dilated eye exam.

“Having regular comprehensive eye care gives your doctor a chance to identify a problem very early on and then treat it,” says Owsley. Annual eye exams are especially important if you have diabetes.

“Many of the healthy behaviors that help reduce your risk for long-term diseases, like heart disease and cancer, can also help to protect your eyesight,” says Owsley. These include not smoking, eating a healthy diet, and controlling conditions like diabetes and high blood pressure. “It’s nice to know that healthy living not only adds years to your life, but also protects your vision as you get older,” Owsley says.



*Article Review. This special issue is a collection of previously published articles. However, articles were updated and re-reviewed by NIH experts prior to inclusion. Published December 2017.*



## The Problem That Piles Up - When Hoarding is a Disorder

**You may have seen reality TV shows about people who hoard mail, gadgets, cats, and even trash. Or, maybe for you, the reality is a little closer. It could be a neighbor or a family member. When people aren't able to throw things away, piles can grow to the ceiling. These piles can make it impossible to use bathrooms, bedrooms, and kitchens. The piles may fall over, trap, and injure people. They can catch on fire. Cluttered homes and yards may attract pests. Neighbors may call the police. Parents may lose custody of children.**

Dr. David F. Tolin's NIH-funded research suggests why it's hard for people with this disorder to part with items, even things with no real-world value. He found that brain activity was different between people with hoarding disorder and healthy people.

"We're always puzzled by the fact that many people with hoarding disorder often don't seem terribly bothered by their circumstance," he says. "If they don't have to make a decision, the parts of their brain that are largely in charge of becoming bothered are underactive."

But if they are forced to decide about whether to discard something, that part of the brain becomes overactive. "And so, the brain is essentially screaming that everything is important."

Doctors don't know what causes hoarding disorder. There's no X-ray or

blood test for a diagnosis. Instead, doctors assess how well people are functioning in their lives.

Hoarding disorder can start during a person's teens or later. It may grow more severe over the decades.

Do you know someone who may need help? For ideas about how to bring up the topic, see the box on page 6. Try to be gentle, calm, and patient. It may take several conversations before the person agrees to work on the problem.

Try not to start an argument. "If a person is not really motivated to do something about the problem, they can dig in their heels. Arguing can even make the problem worse," Tolin warns. There's no effective medication for hoarding disorder, although studies

*"People don't choose to be hoarders, and they aren't being sloppy or lazy. This is a very real mental disorder. It is important to recognize that people with hoarding disorder have lost control of their decision-making abilities."*

Dr. David F. Tolin  
Hoarding Disorder Expert at  
Hartford Hospital's Institute of Living

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are in progress. Tolin says, “Right now, cognitive behavioral therapy is the only evidence-based treatment we have for hoarding.” This is a type of talk therapy that teaches people how to change their thinking patterns and react differently to situations.

Tolin’s team hopes to improve cognitive behavioral therapy so that it’s even better at helping people to discard items. They’re analyzing the brain activities of people before and after they’re successfully treated for hoarding disorder. If the research team can identify the biological mechanisms of successful treatments, they may be able to develop treatments that are even better.

Some people with hoarding disorder are helped by joining a support group with others who have the disorder. There are also organizing professionals who specialize in helping people get rid of clutter. To find more resources for this and other mental health issues, visit [www.nimh.nih.gov/health/find-help](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/find-help).

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## How to Help a Person Who Hoards

Explain why you’re concerned:

“I’m worried that you could fall or become trapped.”

“I’m concerned that you may lose custody of your children.”

“I’m afraid your home will catch on fire.”

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“I can help you find a therapist who specializes in hoarding.”

“We can look for a self-help program on how to let things go.”

“We can find support groups for people who hoard.”

“We can ask the county for resources.”

## Experts Lower “High” Blood Pressure Numbers



You probably get your blood pressure checked every time you go to the doctor. Having high blood pressure increases your chances of heart attacks, strokes, kidney disease, and other serious health problems.

After studying the results from hundreds of studies, experts recently changed the definition of high blood pressure.

Blood pressure is measured in two numbers, like 120/80 mm Hg. The first number is the pressure that the heart uses to push blood through your arteries. The second number is the pressure when the heart is at rest between beats. Normal blood pressure for an adult is below 120/80.

NIH-sponsored research played an important role in providing evidence that the definition of high blood pressure should be changed. Before the guideline changed in November, the definition of high blood pressure was 140/90. Now, high blood pressure is defined as 130 or higher for the

first number, or 80 or higher for the second number.

If you have high blood pressure, your doctor may suggest changes to your diet and physical activity. If lifestyle changes don’t work, medicines can help.

“Only about half the people in the country who have high blood pressure are controlled to recommended levels,” says NIH heart disease expert Dr. David C. Goff, Jr. “We could prevent a lot more heart attacks and strokes if more people had their blood pressure well controlled.”

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# Unexplained Cases of Allergic Reactions Linked to Red Meat

A rare red meat allergy that starts after being bitten by a lone star tick may cause unexplained cases of recurrent anaphylaxis. Researchers found that some people's repeated, severe allergic reactions stemmed from a red meat allergy linked to a specific type of tick bite.

Doctors analyzed 70 patients who had repeated episodes of a severe allergic reaction, called anaphylaxis, from unknown causes. Anaphylaxis can cause a host of problems, such as trouble breathing and passing out. It requires immediate medical attention to prevent severe consequences, even death.

The researchers found that six of the patients had an allergy to a sugar molecule called alpha-gal, which is found in red meats. Most food allergy symptoms



develop within a half hour. People with the alpha-gal allergy showed symptoms between three to six hours after eating meat.

Previous studies have linked lone star tick bites to this unusual food allergy. The patients with the alpha-gal allergy lived in the central and southern United States, where lone star ticks thrive. All six confirmed that they had been bitten by ticks in the past.

“Alpha-gal allergy appears to be yet another reason to protect oneself from tick bites,” says Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, director of NIH’s National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID).

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# How to Spot Fake Prescription Drugs



The National Association of Boards of Pharmacy estimates that 1 to 2 percent of the drugs in North America are counterfeit and warns that the practice is on the rise. It offers these safeguards:

- **Don't buy prescription drugs online** unless it's through the website of a legitimate pharmacy.
- **Examine your medicine closely.** Look for runny coloring or shoddy logos on pills.
- **Watch for changes** in appearance, taste, or efficacy in the medicines you take.
- **Bring any medication that you suspect** is counterfeit to your pharmacist or doctor right away.

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