

The silent disease an eye exam can detect

If getting an annual eye exam isn't a part of your routine, remember: Your heart is too important to overlook your eyes.

Every time we go to our primary care doctor, we're asked to roll up our sleeve to have our blood pressure checked. It's a simple, basic way health professionals can monitor cardiovascular health. What you may not know is that there's another way doctors get a clear look at your blood pressure: your annual eye exam.

By viewing the blood vessels in the retinas of your eyes, your eye doctor is able to look for early signs of high blood pressure, also known as hypertension.

Because many of its sufferers often lack symptoms, high blood pressure has been called the "silent disease." According to the American Heart Association, it affects 76.4 million adults in the United States.¹ Yet, more than 1 in 5 people don't even know they have it.² Because high blood pressure can affect so many vital parts of the body, including the arteries, heart, brain and kidneys³ early detection and treatment are important.

Blood vessels carry blood not only to your heart but also to your eyes. Due to their enormous demand for oxygen, tiny blood vessels in the eyes' retinas can be damaged by high blood pressure. During a comprehensive eye examination, your eye doctor checks for the many subtle changes high blood pressure causes to the retina, a condition known as hypertensive retinopathy.

High blood pressure is also linked to choroidopathy, which occurs when there is fluid buildup under the retina and causes vision disorder. Another vision condition related to high blood pressure is optic neuropathy, or nerve damage, which occurs when blood flow is blocked. Nerve damage can kill nerve cells in your eyes, resulting in bleeding in the eye or vision loss.

If your eye doctor detects any changes that indicate high blood pressure, he or she can work with your primary care doctor to ensure you receive appropriate and timely treatment.

Eye care professionals do not take the place of your physician, and are not a substitute for regular physical exams by your medical doctor.

¹"About High Blood Pressure," American Heart Association, http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/HighBloodPressure/AboutHighBloodPressure/About-High-Blood-Pressure_UCM_002050_Article.jsp

²Lloyd-Jones D, Adams RJ, Brown TM, et al., Heart Disease and Stroke Statistics-2010 Update, A Report from the American Heart Association Statistics Committee and Stroke Statistics Subcommittee, *Circulation*, 2010, 121:e1-e170.

³"Hypertension and Your Eyes," Transitions Optical Inc. - See more at: <http://www.eyesightonwellness.com/open-your-eyes-to-high-blood-pressure/#sthash.Kj6KLxEa.dpuf>

⁴American Academy of Ophthalmology, "Frequency of Ocular Examinations," 2009.

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Regular eye exams can help identify early signs of certain chronic health conditions:⁴

- High blood pressure
- Diabetes
- Heart disease
- High cholesterol

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