

## Regular eye exams can help keep your heart healthy



Just as your primary care physician may listen to your heartbeat and check your blood pressure to monitor your heart rate, your eye doctor examines your eyes to get a clear look into your cardiovascular system. In fact, the eye is one of the only areas of the body where doctors have an unobstructed view of blood vessels. A full eye examination may reveal the first signs of serious heart conditions, including high blood pressure, before symptoms show up elsewhere in the body. And if not managed effectively, many of these cardiovascular conditions can lead to vision loss, too.

As part of your exam, your eye doctor may examine the retina to view small changes in the blood vessels in the back of the eye. This test can detect more serious diseases and is painless and noninvasive. Recent advancements such as digital retinal imaging enable your eye doctor to monitor all the structures of the retina over time.

### **What your eyes say about your blood pressure**

Known as the “silent” disease because its victims often lack symptoms, high blood pressure affects about one in three adults in the United States—while more than one in five people don’t even know they have it.<sup>1</sup> A comprehensive eye exam, however, may uncover early signs of cardiovascular disease.

Your eye doctor can check for subtle changes in the retina that result from high blood pressure, a condition called hypertensive retinopathy.<sup>2</sup> If your eye doctor sees these changes, he or she can refer you to your primary care physician, who can recommend further testing and treatment.

In some cases, vision loss can occur due to hemorrhages or hypertensive retinopathy. This condition happens when blood obstructs the retina, the eye is deprived of oxygen or the macula (the central part of the eye) swells. Obstruction of the arteries and blood vessels in the retina can be temporary or permanent.<sup>3</sup>

By maintaining a healthy lifestyle, you can help avoid risk factors that may affect heart health and vision. Take care of your heart and eyes by following these steps:

- Exercise regularly
- Maintain a proper weight
- Eat a heart-healthy diet rich in omega-3 fatty acids, antioxidants and soluble fiber

Consult with your medical doctor before starting any exercise or diet program. And don't forget to see your eye care professional for regular eye exams. Your eyes and heart will thank you.

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1. National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health
  2. American Heart Association, "Understand Your Risk for High Blood Pressure," July 2010;
  3. Harvard Medical School, "Eye Exams, High Blood Pressure Symptoms & Diabetes Symptoms," 2005

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