

Live Healthy and Be Well!

“Glaucoma is a silent thief”

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Glaucoma is the name for a family of disorders that all have one thing in common – damage to the optic nerve from increased pressure of the fluid inside the eye. If untreated, it can lead to visual field loss and even permanent blindness. It does seem to be an “individualized” disease, as some can have high pressure in the eye for years with no damage, and others suffer much damage from relatively low pressure. *Intraocular hypertension* is the term used to describe high pressure in the fluid (*aqueous humor*) of the major chamber of the eye. Glaucoma comes from a Greek word meaning “opacity of the crystal lens.” Originally, glaucoma and cataracts were thought to be the same, but we started to recognize them as two separate diseases in the early 1700’s.

Glaucoma has been thought of as a “silent thief” (of sight) as it tends to progress slowly, and is often not diagnosed until much damage has been done. The optic nerve is not forgiving of the insult, so the loss of sight is unfortunately permanent. The focus of treatment then, is to prevent further damage by the use of medicines and sometimes eye surgery. If detected early, loss of sight can be held to a minimum. There are two types of this disease you will hear about – open angle and closed angle. The “angle” refers to the space between the iris (colored portion) and the cornea (clear) through which the fluid circulates. Closed angle glaucoma is the least common type (less than 10% in the USA), and usually results in a painful condition (high pressure) with a sudden loss of vision and changes that your friends and family can see in your eye, such as a hazy cornea and dilated vessels in the eye. You may notice halos around lights, your pupil may become oval shaped or fixed in position, and you may experience nausea and vomiting. If this happens, you need to seek treatment quickly, and hopefully avoid extensive progression of the damage. Open angle is the more common type, and usually has no pain and a slower onset with less defined symptoms. This may go on for awhile before people become concerned enough to seek treatment, which may result in more advanced permanent damage.

Risk factors for glaucoma include positive family history. If you have a parent or sibling with glaucoma, you have a 2 to 4 fold increase in risk. Also, women, and people of East Asian and African descent have a greater chance of developing glaucoma. Screening for glaucoma should be accomplished as part of your regular eye exams by your eye care professional (optometrist or ophthalmologist). This screening exam usually involves applying a small “puff” of air against the eye and measuring the amount of indentation that results. They may also check your visual fields for loss, and look into the eye with a special lamp to examine the chambers and actually look at and assess the optic nerve for damage. In open-angle glaucoma, the most common condition, the typical progression from normal vision to complete blindness takes about 25 years or more without treatment, depending on the method of estimation used, and the degree of

intraocular hypertension. With proper treatment and control, there may never be complete vision loss, and every good hope to preserve remaining vision and quality of life.

If you are diagnosed with glaucoma, the goal of treatment is to avoid any further nerve damage and associated loss of vision. This must be accomplished by frequent follow-up examinations, and an individually chosen treatment plan that may include eye drops, oral medicines, and surgery to lower the pressure in the eye and keep it down. As the eye and visual system are important factors in the maintenance of balance and proper position, you should consider yourself at a greater risk for falls if you have advanced glaucoma, and take appropriate precautions. Bottom line, consult with your eye care professional about any activities you should avoid (like driving), so as not to place yourself or others at risk for injury.

We really do enjoy hearing from you with any questions, concerns, or ideas for future columns and/or health and wellness related issues for the *Georgia Mountain Laurel*. Please send an email to rabundoctor@gmail.com, or call us at 706-782-3572, and we will be sure to consider your input. This and previous articles can be now be found on the web at www.rabundoctor.com in an archived format. If you use Twitter, then follow us for health tips and wellness advice @rabundoctor. Like and follow our Facebook page at facebook.com/rabundoctor. Until next month, live healthy and be well!