

Arrest the Silent Sight Stealer: Glaucoma

By **DR. PAMELA KAW**

Glaucoma results from increase in eye pressures to a degree that is not sustainable for proper vision. The nerve of the eye, called the optic nerve, progressively weakens and leads to gradual loss of vision.

The most common type of glaucoma in the U.S. is called *open angle glaucoma*. This type of glaucoma is usually painless. Loss of vision is slow, starts in the periphery and is not noticed until it progresses to the center of the patient's vision.

During a routine physical examination in a primary care physician's office, eye pressures and optic nerves are generally not examined. A visit to an eyecare professional is initiated if there is a vision change or if there is a medical condition known to cause complications in the eye. However, in absence of these scenarios, a routine visit for an eye exam can be overlooked and uncontrolled glaucoma can be missed.

A complete eye exam by an eyecare professional includes eye pressure check and optic nerve exam. When there is suspicion of glaucoma, additional test like retinal scan or peripheral vision test may be performed. Based on the risk of glaucoma (low or high), follow up exams are scheduled. When a diagnosis of glaucoma is made, attempt is made to lower the eye pressure by increasing the drainage or decreasing the production of the fluid (called aqueous humor) that is present inside the eye. Treatment generally starts with eyedrops that target either or both the mechanisms. If the condition stabilizes, no further intervention is needed. If, however, eye pressures do not lower adequately with eyedrops or there is progressive loss of vision despite the eyedrops, surgical treatment with laser or surgery is performed.

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Glaucoma is a condition that damages the eye's optic nerve. According to WebMD, it is an affliction often inherited. Vision is lost gradually as pressure builds within the eye, and its effects don't often show until later in life.

Another type glaucoma, with lower incidence in the U.S. but more prevalent worldwide, is *angle closure glaucoma* where patients can have rapidly progressing symptoms like eye pain, redness of eye, headache, nausea, blurry vision. In this type of glaucoma, the eye pressures rise to high levels rather quickly leading to all or some of the above mentioned symptoms. Angle closure glaucoma, very often, leads to emergency office or ER visits. In this scenario, aggressive medical and surgical treatment is needed to lower the eye pressure and lower the chances of permanent damage to vision.

Regardless of risk factors, it is prudent to have a complete eye examination by a professional eye care provider (optometrist or ophthalmologist) to rule out impending or active glaucoma. In this era of medical advancement, a simple once a day eyedrop, if needed, can prevent huge repercussions of visual loss.

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