

WORTH KEEPING AN EYE ON

Glaucoma is known as the 'silent thief of sight', and 350,000 people in the UK don't even realise they have it. But a 30-second scan at Specsavers can spot the signs early – and prevent serious long-term damage

We monitor our heart rates with wearable technology, tot up our daily protein intake and track our sleep on our phones. On social media, superstar neuroscientists and Insta-famous nutritionists are available 24/7 to offer hacks and advice, promising to help us increase our lifespan or optimise our health.

In the digital age, an inexhaustible wellspring of information has ushered in a new culture of vigilance around personal health and ageing well. So why, when it comes to the more ordinary, evidence-based behaviours, those conclusively proven to reduce disease or even save lives, do so many of us have a blind spot?

Regular dental appointments, health screenings, routine eye tests – these are the tried and tested preventative interventions worth betting your future health on, before you go trying that spirulina juice fast you saw on Instagram.

Yet recent research from Specsavers found that eye appointments were among the most common health checks that Brits put off when they were busy, next to GP appointments and dental examinations. One in 20 people, according to recent figures, have never had an eye test at all, while a reported 10.5 million Brits haven't had one in the past five years.

In midlife, deteriorating vision is often brushed off as an unavoidable part of ageing. But the most common cause of age-related vision loss, cataract, is "relatively easy to treat" according to Dr Nigel Best, optometrist at Specsavers UK for 20 years. Other causes, such as glaucoma, can often be effectively managed if caught early, thus avoiding the irreparable damage and even blindness that can be caused by late-stage disease.

Dr Best's patients are of all ages, but the majority of his work is with older people who often have complex visual needs. In his profession, glaucoma is known as "the silent thief of sight", he says, because it "typically progresses without causing symptoms until the advanced stages, by which time the vision loss it causes is irreversible."

In the early stages, glaucoma tends to affect mid-peripheral vision – which can often go undetected for some time.

It's thought there are 700,000 people with glaucoma in the UK, but half of them are estimated to be undiagnosed – and 27 per cent of the population know nothing about the condition at all.

This lack of awareness explains why Dr Best quite often refers patients to hospital with "quite advanced disease, very significant visual field loss". But even at this stage, they often still haven't noticed any symptoms.

One in 50 people aged over 40 have the condition; by age 80, that figure is closer to 1 in 10. Those with some pre-existing health conditions, such as diabetes or high blood pressure, are more at risk, as are those of Afro-Caribbean ethnicity. Having a close family member with the condition increases fourfold the odds of being diagnosed.

Lifestyle measures can help prevent eye disease generally. Smoking increases the risk, while conversely, having good cardiovascular health is protective. In brief, "anything you can do to improve your overall health, whether that's through exercise, diet or sleep, could have a knock-on reduction in risk," Dr Best says. Perhaps there is a useful role for those TikTok health influencers to play, after all.

Maintaining good vision is a crucial part of ageing well. Glaucoma has been linked to an increased risk of falls among older people, while deteriorating sight can trigger a number of indirect consequences, such as increased social isolation, which is itself known to be linked to depression and even impaired cognitive function in older people.



Look to the future
A simple check-up can reveal eye conditions long before symptoms appear. Above, optometrist Dr Nigel Best

For those who do receive a diagnosis of glaucoma, early treatment is the key to improving prognosis, or even preventing functional visual impairment from occurring at all. That's why in recent years Specsavers has teamed up with Glaucoma UK to raise awareness of the condition. A simple eye check every couple of years is enough to protect most people from serious long-term consequences of the disease.

About a decade ago, Specsavers introduced enhanced optical coherence tomography (OCT) in every store, bringing state-of-the-art diagnostics to community eyecare. "The OCT scan is non-invasive, completely painless, and takes about 30 seconds to carry out", Dr Best explains. "The best analogy for how it works is that it is quite similar to an ultrasound, but it doesn't use sound – it uses light waves to create a cross-sectional view of the eyes."



The benefit of this technology is that it allows optometrists to visualise the structure of the eye "at a much deeper level than with any technology we had before", he says. OCT scans can identify early-stage glaucoma up to four years before it would be picked up using traditional methods.

Jagdeep Singh, specialist optometrist and head of clinical proposition at Newmedica, is another stalwart of the scanning technology, emphasising the value of early testing. "Advances in diagnostic technology, such as OCT, when incorporated into eye examinations, have made it easier to detect glaucoma earlier.

"Eye health is often underestimated as part of the healthy ageing and preventative health conversation, especially among adults in mid-life.

"By integrating eye health into broader wellness narratives and raising awareness of it, we can encourage more people to prioritise their vision as part of their overall health strategy."

Specsavers and Glaucoma UK are ready to relegate glaucoma-related vision impairment to the past. They're just waiting for the British public to go ahead and book their tests.

Specsavers

Book your OCT scan today with Specsavers, the UK's most trusted opticians. An additional charge of up to £10 applies. Contact your local store for details.