IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE



Vision loss can creep in without symptoms – but a routine sight test and scan helped one teacher catch a serious condition before it caused further damage

First your knees start to creak, then your metabolism flags and hangovers last a week. Then one day you realise that text messages look blurry unless you hold your phone out at arm's length to read them.

Once you pass 40, it can feel like every day brings fresh reminders of the unforgiving biological realities of midlife.

But not all age-related changes are obvious. Some can progress silently and wreak havoc undetected, long before you notice anything amiss, says Specsavers.

Rachel Parkinson, a teacher from Preston, Lancashire, understands this better than most. Five years ago she was feeling well and looking forward to turning 40. So it came as a "big shock" when, following a routine eye test, she was diagnosed with the degenerative eye condition glaucoma. More so when Rachel learnt the disease had been stealthily attacking her vision, and if left untreated it could cause her to go blind.

Shortsighted since her teens, Rachel has always been conscientious about her eye health, never missing a test. She had no reason to believe she was especially at risk of glaucoma. No one else in her family has it, and she was on the young side when diagnosed – the disease affects 2 per cent of people in their forties, rising to 8 per cent of those in their eighties.

Still, as part of her comprehensive eye examination she had a state-of-the-art scan called optical coherence tomography (OCT). The examination and OCT scan showed evidence of damage to her optic nerve – a telltale sign of glaucoma. "I have lost some sight, and I can never get that back," she says. But Rachel is keenly aware of the alternative fate she dodged that day; of how much it might have progressed undetected, had she not gone for her eye test.

Almost everyone has heard of glaucoma. It's one of the most common causes of age-related vision loss. But what many people don't know is that it is symptomless in the early stages. And that the damage it causes, though irreversible, can be stopped in its tracks if treated early.

There are approximately 700,000 people with glaucoma in the UK, but about half are unaware they have it. The condition typically affects peripheral vision in the early stages, and goes unnoticed because the eyes work together to compensate as the field of vision is reduced. By the time central vision is affected, it is usually well advanced.

OCT scans, available in all Specsavers stores, assist optometrists to pick up many sight-threatening eye conditions at their earliest stages. Glaucoma can be spotted up to four years earlier with OCT, compared with traditional examination.

As many as 19 million people in the UK don't access regular eye care –but with half of all sight loss being preventable with early detection, nobody should underestimate the importance of a regular eye test.

Thanks to her examination and scan, and the timely intervention that followed, Rachel's diagnosis has, fortunately, had very little impact on her quality of life.

She is monitored at the eye hospital every six months, but she puts her faith in her consultant's confidence that things will be stable for the foreseeable future – and that the outlook is good.

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