

What Your Eyes Say About Your Health

By Kristen Dold / Tue, Mar 20, 2012

Even if you boast 20/20, you should pay a visit to an eye-care specialist. "The eyes are one place in the body through which we can actually see veins and arteries firsthand, with no surgery or cameras," says Shantan Reddy, M.D., an ophthalmologist and retinal specialist at New York University Langone Medical Center. That's why an eye doctor may be the first to detect a serious health problem such as diabetes or high blood pressure.

One example: 65 percent of the time, eye doctors can spot signs of a patient's high cholesterol before any other health-care provider (the condition shows up as yellowish plaques within the retinal blood vessels).

Behold, surprising health cues your eyes give away.

Eye Cue: Silver-or copper-colored arteries

Red Flag For: High blood pressure

More than 20 percent of people with high blood pressure don't know they have it—a problem that could be solved if everyone visited their eye doctor more often. "We can see hypertension through the eyes because it gives retinal arteries a silver or copper hue that we call copper wiring," says Reddy. If left untreated, the condition can cause blood vessels in the retina and throughout the body to harden, increasing the risk for heart attack or stroke.

Eye Cue: A mole on the eye's inner layer

Red Flag For: Melanoma

Sunlight can wreak havoc on more than your skin—it may increase the risk of developing cancer inside the eyeball. "The cancer can look like little raised surfaces or moles in the pigment layer of the retina," says ophthalmologist Sophie J. Bakri, M.D., of the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. Diagnosing an eye melanoma early is crucial, she says; it often has no other symptoms and can quickly metastasize to surrounding tissues.

Eye Cue: Leaky blood vessels

Red Flag For: Diabetes

High blood sugar can clog or damage retinal blood vessels over time, rendering them weak and porous. Eye doctors can often spot the seepage or the new, abnormal blood

vessels that sprout up to replace faulty ones. Indeed, diabetes takes a big toll on the eyes in general and can lead to blindness in serious cases.

Eye Cue: Inflammation

Red Flag For: Autoimmune disease

Autoimmune conditions can cause the body to attack healthy cells and tissues (including those within the eyes), leading to inflammation. The process can lead to "If we see inflammation inside swollen ocular surface blood the eye, 30 to 50 percent of vessels and red, itchy, watery the time that patient will have some sort of undiagnosed autoimmune disease, like lupus or rheumatoid arthritis," says Bakri. Another related symptom? Severely dry eyes, the result of compromised tear glands.

Eye Cue: Interior blisters

Red Flag For: CSR

It sounds gross, but you can get blisters inside your eyeballs. The condition, called central serous retinopathy (CSR), is typically caused by excessive mental or emotional stress, which can tax the body so much that the retina starts to leak blister-forming fluid. "Eye doctors used to know CSR as a disease of stressed men with type-A personalities, but an increasing number of women are being diagnosed," says Bakri. The most common symptom is that patients may also have blurry vision or see wavy lines when trying to focus on a set point. In many cases, CSR can be alleviated by slashing stress levels; but if not, patients may be helped by laser treatment.

Eye Cue: Swollen blood vessels on the white part of eye

Red Flag For: Allergies

Airborne allergens such as pollen, dust, and animal dander often affect the eyes. As a protective mechanism, your peepers secrete anti-inflammatory histamines and other natural chemicals—but not without side effects. The process can lead to swollen ocular surface blood vessels and red, itchy, watery eyes visible to you, your eye doctor, and everyone else. For a proper diagnosis, though, do see an M.D.

Inside Your Eye Exam

A comprehensive test is a multistep investigation.

Visual Acuity Test: Yep, it's the age-old eye chart. as you call out letters on a randomized chart, your doctor can discern how close and far you can see—through both eyes, separately and together—and whether you need glasses.

Pressure Test: Glaucoma occurs when fluid builds up in the eyeball, causing harmful pressure. When your doctor shoots a puff of air into your eye, she can measure eye pressure via light reflections.

Dilation: In order to look deep inside your eyes, your m.D. or o.D. needs to dilate, or widen, your pupils with a few painless eye drops (you'll have fuzzy vision for a while). Some opticians can now do a similar procedure with a camera like gadget, but it's still best to be fully dilated during an exam. The camera doesn't always capture the whole picture.

Slit Lamp Exam: Your doctor uses a bright light and microscope to zero in on your cornea, iris, and retina. She can spot foreign tissue, and you'll often also get a drop of yellow dye that makes corneal scratches more visible.

Decoding the Doctors

Determine which of these three common optical experts is right for you.

1. Ophthalmologist

Degree: M.D., which requires four years of medical school, at least three years of residency, and typically two more years of specialized training

The top docs on the eye chain, ophthalmologists are surgeons who can perform cataract removals, retinal reattachments, and more. They can also do your regular comprehensive vision checkup. (Tip: If you're thinking about getting LASIK correction, you'll have to see an ophthalmologist. A few states have given optometrists the go-ahead to perform other laser procedures, but Aaron Weingeist, M.D., clinical correspondent for the American Academy of Ophthalmology, advises seeing an ophthalmologist for all of your options.)

2. Optometrist

Degree: O.D., which requires four years of post-grad doctorate training

Day-to-day eye issues, such as farsightedness, nearsightedness, and astigmatism (the inability to focus on a set point) can be diagnosed and treated by these professionals, who are not medical doctors but instead have a doctoral degree. They can do comprehensive vision exams and prescribe contact lenses and glasses.

3. Optician

Degree: None, although some states require a one-to two-year certification degree and license

Dispensing prescription eyeglasses and making adjustments or repairs to your specs are an optician's primary responsibilities. (In other words, this is the person at your local eyeglasses shop.)