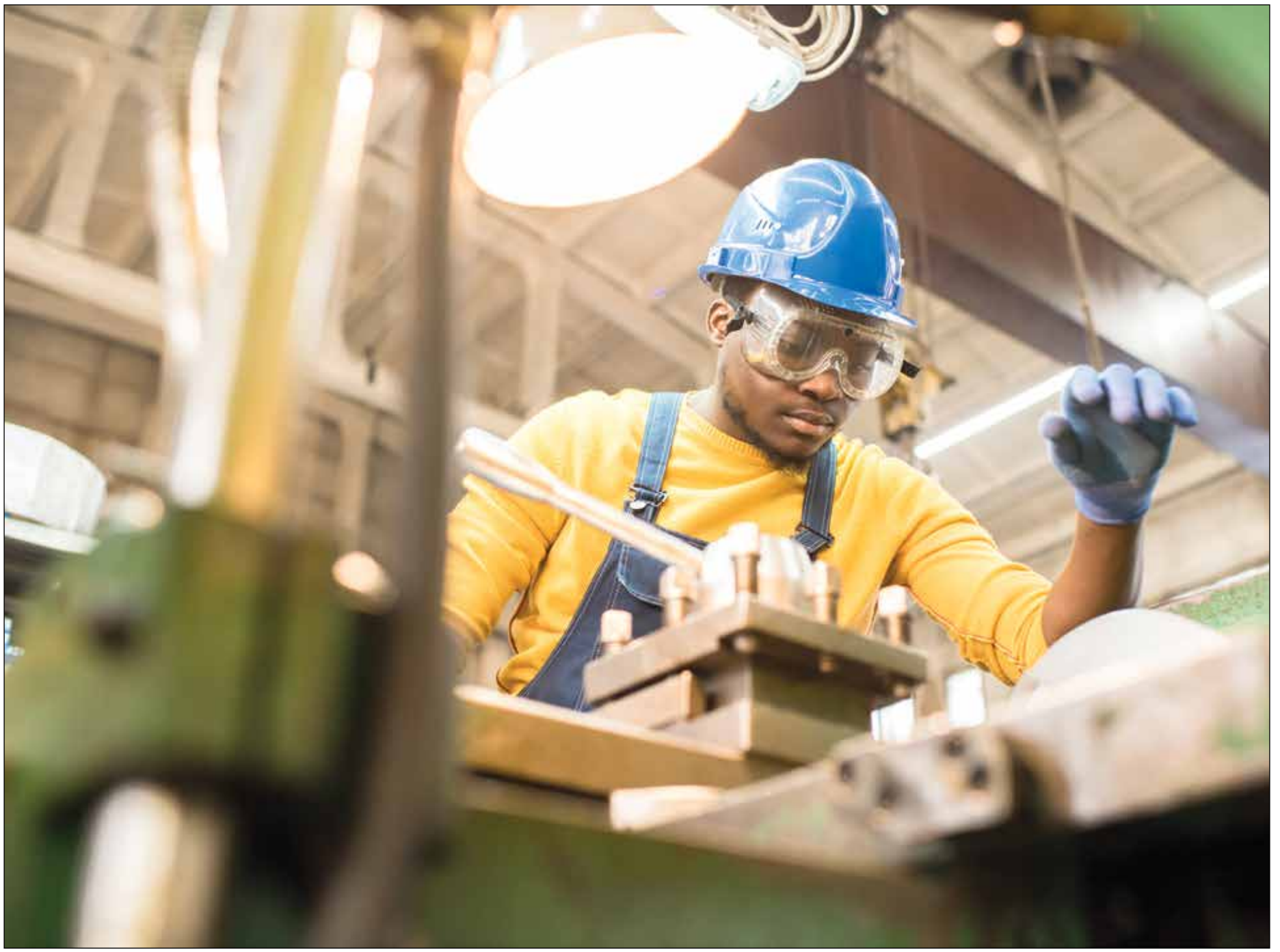
Smart Lifestyle Choices

Many factors help you keep your vision sharp, from wearing safety glasses to eating well and getting regular check-ups.



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Injuries, genetics and illnesses can negatively affect vision, but many aspects of eye health are within our control. Here are some key recommendations:

DIETARY CHOICES

What you eat plays a significant role in maintaining good vision. Dark, leafy greens like spinach, collard greens and kale have been found to support eye health. Similarly, fish high in omega-3 fatty acids can be beneficial, including salmon, halibut and tuna. Excess weight is another concern, as it increases the risk of diabetes and related eye diseases. If you're unsure about how to adjust your diet for optimum eye health, look to your doctor for tailored guidance.

PROTECTING YOUR EYES

Protective eyewear is crucial for activities that pose risks to your eyes. That includes machinery-based jobs, yard work where debris may fly and certain sports. Safety goggles, eye guards and shields made of durable polycarbonate material offer protection that's up to 10 times stronger than conventional plastic lenses. You can purchase these items through your eye care provider or at sporting goods stores. Don't forget sunglasses: Choose options that specifically block UV-A and UV-B rays to defend against sun damage during everyday exposure.

REGULAR APPOINTMENTS

Gradual changes in vision often go unnoticed. Scheduling comprehensive eye exams with a qualified professional can help catch changes early. Certain eye diseases, including age-related macular degeneration and diabetic eye disease, frequently develop without symptoms. Early detection protects your vision and health. A dilated exam can identify these conditions during their initial stages when treatment is most effective. Eye tests can verify whether corrective lenses are necessary or ensure your prescription glasses are up-to-date.

SMOKING AND EYESIGHT

Smoking isn't simply harmful to your lungs; it's also detrimental to your eyes. Scientific studies link smoking to a higher risk of cataracts, damage to the optic nerve and macular degeneration. Any of them can lead to blindness. If you smoke, quitting is one of the best choices you can make for your overall health--and that includes your vision.

Choosing the Best Glasses

You've just received a brand-new prescription. Now what?

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Choosing the best glasses isn't easy. Their primary purpose is to correct vision problems, but they should also boast style and comfort without costing a fortune. If you're dealing with blurred vision or having difficulty reading street signs, it's a good time to schedule an appointment with a trusted eye care professional.

After conducting a variety of tests, they'll prescribe corrective lenses tailored to your needs. From there, you'll need to choose the appropriate lens material, any added features like protective coating and frames that suit you.

MODERN IMPROVEMENTS

While still referred to as "glasses," modern lenses are actually crafted from other materials. Traditional glass lenses were prone to damage and posed a serious risk to the eyes if broken into shards. Today's lenses are typically made from high-index plastics. These newer materials offer the thinnest lenses ever available while remaining sturdy and affordable. Your optician will guide you in selecting the most suitable material based on your specific requirements.

FRAMING YOUR OPTIONS

Your new glasses will likely rest on your nose for extended periods each day, so comfort is just as essential as appearance. Begin by determining whether your prescription or insurance plan limits the size, brand or type of frames available to you. Once you know these parameters, work with an optician to explore frames within that range. Take note of how they fit on your ears and how well they complement your facial features. These frames will become an integral part of your personal style, so finding the right one matters. Try on multiple styles until you find the perfect balance between function and fashion.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Coverage for eye care varies significantly from one health insurance plan to another. Since prescription glasses often cost hundreds of dollars, learning beforehand what your insurance will cover can help you make the right choice. Some policies cover most or all expenses, while others have strict limitations. For example, your plan might require out-of-pocket payment for add-on features like anti-glare or scratch-resistant coatings. They may restrict how often you can purchase new frames. Those luxury frames might need to wait if you're in the midst of a personal budget crunch.

Help for Aging Eyes

A range of age-related conditions can affect eye health, so remain vigilant.

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The most common issues facing older Americans include cataracts, glaucoma and age-related macular degeneration, according to Johns Hopkins Medicine.

If you're not already under a doctor's care, experts advise all adults to undergo a comprehensive eye exam upon reaching age 40. This then provides a baseline for monitoring changes in the years ahead.

LEVELS OF PROTECTION

Family history plays a role in what happens to our eyes as we age. But protecting them actually involves multiple other factors. For instance, quitting smoking is highly recommended, as smoking significantly raises the risk of macular degeneration. Research has shown that smoking can lead to cellular damage, restricted blood flow and oxidative stress. Additionally, maintaining a healthy weight keeps your eyes healthy.

RISK FACTORS

Certain demographics face higher risks for specific conditions. Those with fair skin and blue eyes are more prone to developing cataracts due to greater UV exposure. Those rays may alter cellular metabolism in the retina and lens over time. To reduce exposure, choose sunglasses with UVA and UVB protection. Obesity can heighten the risk of glaucoma due to increased fluid buildup within the eyes. Other health concerns that adversely affect eye health include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes and insulin resistance.

Low vision is also a concern. The primary causes of low vision are glaucoma, age-related macular degeneration and diabetic retinopathy. Today, experts say nearly 15 percent of those aged 80 or older are dealing with low vision. Services such as rehabilitation are available and these low-vision services have been linked to a reduced risk of mortality, since these services help improve activity levels and medication management.

REGULAR EXAMS

Regular eye exams allow for early detection and treatment of age-related eye problems. Discuss any new symptoms with your healthcare providers so they can provide support or recommend services. These checkups are vital for managing diseases that contribute to low vision. Approximately 4 million Americans currently live with low vision, and this number is projected to double within the next three decades. By then, more than 2 million Americans could be blind, while almost 10 million experience low vision.

Contact Lens Care

If you don't like eyeglasses, contact lenses provide a smart alternative to seeing poorly.

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However, they're a lot more delicate than your average pair of frames. Here are some helpful guidelines for contact lens care.

GOOD ADVICE

Even veteran contact lens wearers need to follow the directions of their personal eye doctor. Get fitted by a qualified eye care professional, even if you're opting for cosmetic lenses. Incorrectly fitting or expired lenses can cause serious issues, including corneal damage and scratches to your eye. Immediately remove the lenses if you experience redness, sensitivity to light, pain, blurred vision or unusual eye discharge, and then consult your doctor. They'll provide expert advice on how long to wear them and how to keep your lenses clean.

COMMON MISTAKES

People often handle contact lenses without washing their hands. Sleeping in non-approved lenses, reusing old contact lens solution and using water to rinse them are other harmful practices. These actions increase the risk of irritation, eye infections and more serious vision-threatening problems.

WHAT TO DO

Before handling your contact lenses, wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water then completely dry them.

Clean and disinfect your lenses each time you remove them using the system your eye care specialist recommends. Strictly adhere to the wear and replacement timetable given to you by the doctor, including proper storage and regular cleaning. If you plan to store contacts for an extended period, ask whether they need to be disinfected again before use. Lenses stored for 30 days or longer without proper disinfection should be discarded, according to widely accepted medical guidelines.

WHAT NOT TO DO

Never sleep in your daily wear lenses. Avoid showering, swimming or otherwise exposing your eyes to water while wearing contacts. Never rinse or store lenses in plain water and avoid wetting your contacts with saliva, since it isn't sterile. Do not reuse contact lens solution or transfer it into a different container. It's important to keep the tip of the solution bottle uncontaminated. Keep it tightly closed when not in use. Finally, don't use saline solution or rewetting drops for disinfecting purposes.

Why Sunglasses Are Important

Let's face it, sunglasses have always been cool. But they serve an important function in maintaining good eye health.

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Opt for glasses that protect your eyes from harmful ultraviolet light which can have long-term negative effects on your vision. These rays cause damage to various parts of the eyes, including the cornea, lenses, eyelids and retinas. Serious conditions that threaten your sight can develop over time. Here's how to choose widely.

WHAT ARE UV RAYS?

UV rays originate from the sun and artificial light sources. This form of radiation poses a significant risk to eye health. Experts say prolonged exposure to ultraviolet light increases the likelihood of developing diseases and other complications, such as eye cancers. Beyond protection for the eye itself, wearing sunglasses benefits the skin around the eyes. This area is especially delicate due to its thinness, making it more prone to damage from radiation. UV rays penetrate this fragile skin and even harm the eyes when they're shut.

MINIMIZING YOUR RISK

Sunglasses aren't just a summertime essential. Ultraviolet exposure occurs year-round, regardless of the season or weather conditions. To adequately protect yourself, the American Academy of Ophthalmology recommends choosing sunglasses that block 100 percent of UV rays. (Wraparound styles are particularly effective, as they provide added coverage against stray UV light.) Note that UV intensity also increases at higher altitudes.

Remember that sunglasses aren't just for adults. Introduce sunglasses to your children as early as they're willing to wear them. Opt for pairs that offer broad-spectrum protection against both UVA and UVB rays to ensure comprehensive coverage in any situation. You'll be establishing good habits that will help them maintain eye health into old age.

ALL-WEATHER PROTECTION

You'll need this protection whether it's sunny or cloudy outside. Being surrounded by water or snow amplifies your exposure through reflected light, making them important times to wear sunglasses. Cloud cover doesn't block UV rays entirely; thin clouds and haze allow harmful radiation to pass through. It's particularly important to wear sunglasses during early afternoons when sunlight is strongest, and when taking light-sensitive medications such as certain NSAIDs, antibiotics and diuretics.

If You Suffer From Dry Eyes

In most cases, having dry eyes will not lead to lasting damage if the situation is promptly treated. Chronic dry eyes, however, can lead to serious damage.

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Tears aren't simply made up of water. They also consist of fatty oils, thousands of proteins and mucus. These components work together to shield the eyes from environmental irritants while keeping the surface smooth for comfortable blinking. Over the years, we've learned a lot about why the body might not produce enough tears and how to figure out whether there's a serious problem.

YOUR RISK FACTOR

Dry eyes can affect both men and women, though women are at greater risk, particularly after menopause. The condition is more common in older adults, but dry eyes might indicate an underlying condition affecting individuals of any age. If you experience prolonged dryness, it's important to talk to your eye specialist about the situation.

The American Academy of Ophthalmology has identified several potential causes, including blepharitis, entropion, ectropion or autoimmune conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis.

GETTING DIAGNOSED

A comprehensive eye exam is typically required to confirm the diagnosis. This includes assessing the external structure of the eye, the eyelids and the cornea. The doctor will evaluate the severity of symptoms and inquire about any family history with dry eyes, while considering other health conditions that may affect your tear production. In advanced cases, doctors will perform the various testing methods that employ blotting strips under the eyes to measure tear production.

TREATMENT OPTIONS

A dry eyes condition is usually chronic, meaning it won't go away. Still, there are a variety of treatments to help effectively manage your symptoms. Mild cases may respond well to prescription-strength or even American Optometric Association-recommended over-the-counter artificial tears. In some situations, topical steroids might be prescribed. For more severe cases, small tear-duct inserts made from semi-permanent silicone or dissolvable collagen can be used to retain tears on the eye's surface. These inserts can last for days to months, depending on the material chosen. In the most extreme cases, surgery may be necessary to close the tear ducts that drain excess tears into the nasal cavity.

Signs of Macular Degeneration

Be on the lookout for one of the primary causes of vision loss for those over 50.

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The macula sits in the middle of the retina and is responsible for the sharpness in the things we see. People with age-related macular degeneration experience the loss of their central vision, making it difficult to see fine details far away or up close. It's an increasingly prevalent condition, becoming one of the primary causes of vision loss for senior citizens. Here's what to look for:

TWO FORMS OF AWD

There are two forms of age-related macular degeneration: dry and wet. Dry AMD accounts for roughly 80 percent of cases and occurs when the macula thins with age, leading to the buildup of small protein deposits known as drusen. (Peripheral vision typically remains unaffected.) Unfortunately, there is no specific treatment for dry age-related macular degeneration. Wet AMD, on the other hand, develops when abnormal blood vessels grow beneath the retina, leaking blood or fluid and causing scarring of the macula. Vision loss tends to progress faster with wet age-related macular degeneration compared to dry AMD.

ARE YOU ARE RISK?

There are several risk factors that can increase your likelihood of developing age-related macular degeneration. One is eating a diet high in saturated fats, which is found in foods like meat, cheese and butter. You are more likely to get AWD if you are overweight, if you smoke or if you have high blood pressure. Heart disease and elevated cholesterol levels may contribute, as well. Those older than 50 are at a higher risk. So are people with a family history of age-related macular degeneration.

DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT

Ophthalmologists use several methods to detect AMD, including performing optical coherence tomography scans, examining an Amsler grid for visual distortions, and using fluorescein angiography to observe eye structures. There is no cure for dry age-related macular degeneration, but some patients may benefit from supplements containing nutrients such as vitamin C, lutein, vitamin E, zeaxanthin, copper and zinc. Don't begin a supplement plan, however, before discussing it with your ophthalmologist. Treatment for wet AMD typically involves anti-VEGF drugs, which reduce the growth of abnormal blood vessels and help control fluid leakage. In some cases, laser surgery may be beneficial.