Smoking and Eye Disease

Smoking and eye disease

Smoking tobacco (cigarettes, cigars or pipes) can cause lung disease, heart disease, cancer, and many other serious health problems. But did you know that smoking can also harm your eyes?

Eye Words to Know

Retina: Layer of nerve cells lining the back wall inside the eye. This layer senses light and sends signals to the brain so you can see.

Macula: Small but important area in the center of the retina. You need the macula to clearly see details of objects in front of you.

Lens: Clear part of the eye behind the colored iris. It helps to focus light on the retina (back of the eye) so you can see.

Optic nerve: A nerve at the back of your eye that connects to your brain. The optic nerve sends light signals to your brain so you can see.

Here are some eye problems that are made worse by smoking:

Dry eye. This is when your eyes do not have enough—or the right kind of—tears. Smoking with dry eye will make your eyes more likely to feel scratchy, sting, burn or be red.

Cataracts. If you smoke, you are at increased risk for getting cataracts. A cataract is clouding of your eye's naturally clear lens. It causes blurry vision and makes colors look dull, faded or yellowish. Cataracts are removed with surgery.

Age-related macular degeneration (AMD). This disease happens when a part of the retina called the macula is damaged. You lose your central vision and cannot see fine details. But your peripheral (side) vision stays normal. Sometimes medicine or surgery can help certain people with AMD from getting worse. But there is no cure. Studies show that smokers and ex-smokers are more likely to get AMD than people who never smoked.

Diabetic retinopathy. Smokers who also have diabetes risk getting diabetic retinopathy. Diabetic retinopathy is when blood vessels in the eye are damaged. It causes blurry or distorted vision and possibly blindness. Treatment includes medication or surgery.

Optic nerve problems. People who smoke risk having optic nerve problems. The optic nerve connects the eye to the brain. Damage to this nerve can lead to blindness.

Smoking can increase risk factors which can lead to glaucoma. Glaucoma is a disease that affects the optic nerve.

Uveitis. Smoking can lead to a disease that affects part of the eye called the uvea. This is the middle layer of the eye wall. Uveitis is when this layer becomes inflamed (red and swollen). This disease causes a red eye, pain and vision problems.

Graves' disease. This is a disease of the body's thyroid gland. One of the symptoms of Graves' disease is bulging eyes. Smokers who have Graves' disease risk having their eye condition get worse. They can also lose vision.

Pregnant? Smoking can harm your baby's eyes.

If you smoke while pregnant, your baby is 5 times more likely to get bacterial meningitis as a child. This is when tissues around the brain swell. Meningitis can cause eye infection(s) and other vision problems.

Also, smoking during pregnancy increases your risk for giving birth too early. Premature birth can lead to a serious eye problem called "retinopathy of prematurity." The baby may have permanent vision loss or blindness.

Summary

Smoking tobacco (cigarettes, cigars or pipes) can make eye problems worse. Glaucoma, cataracts, macular degeneration and dry eye are some of these problems.

Also, a baby's eyes can be affected if the mother smokes during pregnancy.

Quitting smoking can help save your vision.

Get more information about smoking and eye health from EyeSmart—provided by the American Academy of Ophthalmology—at **aao.org/smoking-link**.

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