

## The vision to make a difference

### *The Health Column*

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Every 65 minutes an Australian loses part or all of their vision. This is a distressing health statistic, but the good news is about 75 per cent of vision loss is preventable or treatable if detected early enough.

Vision loss can affect people at any time in their lives. It will often happen gradually so that by the time it becomes noticeable, the damage is done.

During July the RANZCO Eye Foundation runs its JulEYE campaign to encourage people to have their eyes tested.



*Photo by Loredana Bejerita*

JulEYE aims to raise community awareness of eye health issues, as well as funds for research projects into the causes and cures of vision impairment and blindness. The campaign also supports international development projects whose goals are aligned with those of the Eye Foundation.

The Eye Foundation advises that good eye health begins with regular testing from birth.

The first eight years of a child's life are critical for eye development. If problems are not picked up during this time, damage and vision loss can be permanent. If you are a parent, be aware that regular eye checks are just as important to a young child's overall health and wellbeing as other health checks.

One eye condition which affects older people is glaucoma - the name given to a group of eye diseases where the optic nerve at the back of the eye is damaged. The damage is caused by pressure in the eyeball as a result of the build-up of fluid. Fluid build-up occurs when the canals of the eye, which normally drain the fluid away, fail to do their job properly.

It is estimated that some 300,000 Australians are affected by glaucoma. But because there is usually no pain and loss of sight is gradual, as many as 50% of those people are not aware that they have a serious problem.

Unfortunately, glaucoma can't be cured. Once there is damage to the nerve cells in the eye, it is irreversible. However, some of the serious consequences of glaucoma may be prevented if the condition is discovered early. Early treatment - usually with eye drops to stabilise the pressure in the eye - can help to avoid further loss of sight.

As you age, the risk of developing glaucoma increases. You are also at greater risk of getting glaucoma if you have diabetes or high blood pressure, are short-sighted, or if you get migraine headaches.

Having a family history of eye disease also puts you at greater risk. If someone in your family has glaucoma, you are almost three times more likely to have it yourself. So it's imperative to ask relatives about your family's eye health history and have an eye check this JULIYE.

Discuss with your pharmacist or doctor if you have noticed any changes to your vision. Your pharmacist can refer you to a doctor for an eye check. If you have a serious eye condition or noticeable changes to vision, ask your doctor for a referral to an ophthalmologist.

Your pharmacist can also help you to select the right treatment for minor eye conditions like conjunctivitis and red eye. Your pharmacist will always refer you to a doctor if they feel a condition requires more attention.

So make July the month you treat your eyes to a test, and perhaps save yourself from long-term vision problems further down the track. Don't forget your children too - act now to protect them for their adulthood.

Up-to-date advice about glaucoma, other eye conditions and treatments for eye disease is available via a range of Self Care Fact Cards. Titles include *Glaucoma* and *Red and Dry Eyes*. These are available at pharmacies around Australia providing the Self Care health information. For the nearest location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772 or log onto the website [www.psa.org.au](http://www.psa.org.au) and click on "Self Care" and then "Find a Self Care Pharmacy".