

# Glaucoma

## *The Health Column*

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Glaucoma is an eye disease that can cause vision loss and is potentially blinding. It runs in families. If someone in your family has glaucoma, you are up to 10 times more likely to develop glaucoma. You probably have never noticed or even thought about glaucoma, as it is rarely discussed. In Australia, approximately 300,000 people have glaucoma. However, about half of these people don't even know they have it. Generally, there is no pain associated with glaucoma, and the loss of sight is gradual. Peripheral vision (side vision) is usually affected first, and many people don't even notice it's gone.



In glaucoma, the optic nerve, located at the back of the eye, is damaged. This may happen if the pressure in the eye increases. Fluid in the eye should drain away, lowering eye pressure. But in glaucoma, the fluid doesn't drain away properly, slowly destroying the optic nerve, which eventually leads to blindness. The optic nerve can also become damaged by certain medicines, such as steroids, and some medical conditions, such as diabetes and high blood pressure.

There are some simple things you can do to 'beat invisible glaucoma', such as having regular and comprehensive eye checks. These checks must include measurement of eye fluid pressure, review of the optic nerve and assessment of visual field loss. Optometrists and ophthalmologists conduct these tests.

So who should have a comprehensive eye test? Anyone who:

- has a family history of glaucoma
- is over 40 years of age
- is having trouble seeing
- has taken certain medicines, such as steroids for lung conditions
- has diabetes
- has high blood pressure
- has had a serious eye injury.

The good news is that, if you are found to have glaucoma, it is treatable. Although damage to the optic nerve is not reversible, further damage to your eyesight can be stopped or slowed down. People with glaucoma are usually prescribed eye drops to lower the pressure in their eyes. Eye drops must be used regularly and exactly as prescribed by your doctor. Ask your pharmacist if you are unsure how to use eye drops. Sometimes, laser treatment, eye surgery or a combination of treatments is needed.

This year, World Glaucoma Week is 12–18 March. Glaucoma Australia is encouraging us to host a B.I.G (Beat Invisible Glaucoma) Breakfast, to raise funds to help Glaucoma Australia increase glaucoma awareness and provide educational resources to the community. During glaucoma week, gather with your family, friends and colleagues to eat breakfast and talk about glaucoma. More information, including event resources and fundraising tips, is available at [www.thebigbreakfast.org.au](http://www.thebigbreakfast.org.au).

If you want to know more about glaucoma, talk with your local pharmacist. They are medicine and health information experts. They can assist you with understanding how your medicines work, tell you about possible side effects and provide information about glaucoma.

*Glaucoma and Vision impairment* Self Care Fact Cards are available at pharmacies around Australia providing the Self Care health information.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to [www.psa.org.au/selfcare](http://www.psa.org.au/selfcare), then click 'Find a *Self Care pharmacy* near you'.