



Eye on Health

Keep Your Eye Out For Cataracts

(NAPSA)—If you're over the age of 55, now is a good time to take stock of how well you are caring for your eyes.

Cataracts, which are most often found in people over the age of 55, are the leading cause of blindness worldwide. When a cataract develops, it causes a clouding of all or part of the normally clear lens in the eye, which results in blurred or distorted vision. The risk for cataracts increases with age, occurring in 30 to 40 percent of people over the age of 75, but people younger than 55 can be affected as well.

The exact cause of cataracts is unknown. The damage that occurs to the lens and the subsequent clouding may be due to advancing age, heredity, an injury or disease, excessive exposure to the ultraviolet radiation from sunlight, cigarette smoking or the use of certain medications. Some studies suggest that women may be at a slightly higher risk than men. African Americans also have a higher risk for developing and becoming blind from cataracts.

The good news is that there are preventive measures such as: not smoking, reducing exposure to sunlight by wearing UVA/UVB protective eyewear and wide-brimmed hats, controlling diseases like diabetes and eating a healthy diet. Several research studies suggest that the antioxidant vitamins C and E may protect against the development and progression of cataracts. Early evidence also suggests that the carotenoids lutein (pronounced loo-teen) and zeaxanthin (pronounced zee-uh-zan-thin), which are also antioxidants, may be protective against cataracts.

More than half of the observational studies done to look at trends in a given population have reported a reduced risk of cataracts among



Antioxidant vitamins may help prevent cataracts.

people who took vitamins C and/or E in supplemental form or through higher dietary intake and who had increased blood levels of one or both vitamins. Long-term use of vitamin C and E supplements for 10 years or more also showed a reduction in risk of cataracts.

Two clinical trials, which compared the results of one group receiving vitamin supplementation versus one who did not, examined the potential of antioxidant vitamins to slow the progression of cataracts into a more severe form. In one trial, there was no change in the progression of cataracts after seven years. The other study, which used an antioxidant supplement containing higher levels of vitamins C and E and beta-carotene than the first study, resulted in a small decrease in the progression of cataracts in three years.

Observational research has also investigated the relationship between dietary intake or blood levels of lutein and zeaxanthin and the risk of developing cataracts. Three studies found that those with a high

dietary intake of lutein and zeaxanthin were less likely to need cataract surgery or were less likely to develop cataracts. In another study, people with higher levels of lutein and beta-carotene in their blood had a lower risk for developing certain types of cataracts.

Good sources of vitamin C include citrus fruits, strawberries, cantaloupe, green peppers and tomatoes. Vitamin E can be found in most nuts and seeds as well as most vegetable oils. Lutein and zeaxanthin are abundant in green leafy vegetables like kale, collard greens and spinach and can also be found in corn, peas, orange peppers and tangerines.

Given the positive association between nutrition and cataracts, it seems prudent for people to increase the amount of certain antioxidants in their daily diet. Eating at least five servings of fruits and vegetables each day can provide at least 100 mg of vitamin C and 5 to 6 mg of carotenoids including lutein and zeaxanthin. Two servings of nuts and seeds can provide 8 to 14 mg of vitamin E. Supplementation with multivitamin and mineral formulas that have been enhanced with lutein and/or zeaxanthin may also help some people meet their goals for these nutrients.

Eye exams should be scheduled yearly. If you experience blurred or hazy vision, the appearance of spots in front of the eyes, increased sensitivity to glare, the feeling of having a film over the eyes or even a temporary improvement in near vision, a cataract may be forming. It's important to visit an eye care professional, who can diagnose cataracts and monitor their development. For more information on nutrition and maintaining eye health, visit www.aoa.org/eyeeonnutrition.