

Fashion forward frames at Specs Around Town complement proper vision care.

Eyes to Behold

Seeking regular care and educating yourself about eye and vision health are key ways to enjoy all there is to see.

by Dana Mancuso
photograph by Chris Perardi



They are said to be the window to the soul, but also your window to the world. Your eyes allow you to experience such wonders as colors in a rainbow and the first smile from an infant.

To keep those baby blues—or browns, greens, or hazels—in tip top shape, it's important to get regular eye exams to prevent problems before they arise or treat problems before they worsen.

Like many eye care professionals, Catharine Crockett, IMD, an ophthalmologist with Eye Surgical Associates in Bloomington, recommends a full eye exam, including a dilation of the pupils, every two years. Some conditions and circumstances warrant more frequent professional care. Though a range of common conditions can affect the health of your eyes or the eyes of those you love, seeking this regular care and educating yourself regarding eye and vision health are key ways to enjoying all there is to see.

Dry Eyes

Eyes need a flow of moisture in order to function properly. When eyes are dry, a person may experience pain, itching, a gritty sensation in the eye area, and light sensitivity, among other things. Dry eyes are a common problem, Crockett said, that typically can easily be

solved once the cause is discovered.

"We see this all the time," she said. "It has a myriad of causes, from menopause and aging to environmental things, like staring at computers or (suffering from the dry air of) winter time with low humidity. All these can result in dry eyes."

It's not uncommon for the condition to be a result of taking some kinds of medications.

"Water pills or decongestants can affect the moisture in your eye," Crockett said. "If you have worn contacts for 20 years, the disinfectants from the solution may affect your eyes. And with aging, your glands don't secrete as much moisture."

Crockett said the approach to care is as diverse as the cause of problems. Your doctor may begin with an assessment that leads to anything from a recommendation for additional moisture to lifestyle changes. It may be a trial and error period until symptoms are relieved.

"Topical lubrication is available over the counter as eye drops," she said. "You can also try to look away from the (computer) screen once in a while and start blinking. Studies show that if you are staring at a screen, you blink only half as often. Your eyes will get dry under those conditions."

Julie Kubsch, a licensed optician and owner of Specs Around Town in Bloomington, usually recommends that people who wear contacts

make sure they also have a pair of eyeglasses, especially if they are prone to getting dry eyes.

"If you are a contact wearer it's good to give your eyes a break. Have back-up glasses," she said.

She also noted that people may experience eye strain from not using the correct eyewear for the situation at hand. Sometimes one pair of glasses and one prescription worn for all vision needs is not the best practice.

"You can purchase lenses made just for your work setting," Kubsch pointed out. "You can have your sunglasses, your computer glasses, and your every day glasses. Just like people and shoes. You don't wear high heels to run a marathon."

Macular Degeneration

More people today are diagnosed with age-related macular degeneration (AMD), but that's because of more awareness of the disease and the growing population of older people. AMD is the leading cause of vision loss for Americans older than 60 according to the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The diagnosis covers a range of conditions, but central to the disease is the deterioration of a portion of the eye's retina, the macula. There are two types of the disease, wet and dry, and both types are characterized by loss of central vision. Patients with AMD notice blurriness or complete darkness in the center of

their vision. Dry AMD is the most common type. An early symptom of wet AMD is that straight lines appear wavy. See an eye care professional immediately if this is one of your symptoms.

Risk factors for AMD include smoking, obesity, and family history. Also, the disease is more prevalent in Caucasians and females.

Common treatments of AMD include laser surgery and drug therapy, although neither is considered a cure. With these treatments, eye care professionals hope to slow the progression of AMD, but vision loss may still continue.

Although there are no cures for AMD, early diagnosis and preventative measures can decrease incidence and mitigate severity. Experts recommend eating a diet high in fish, engaging in an active lifestyle with plenty of physical exercise, and maintaining normal blood pressure.

Crockett explained that although there is not yet enough evidence to make specific recommendations about taking vitamins to prevent or treat AMD, a large study called Age Related Eye Disease Study (AREDS) is investigating the value of vitamins in treatment and prevention. The initial part of the study looked at high doses of particular vitamins and reported some promising results.

"There was about a 25 percent reduction in severe vision loss in those who already had diagnosed macular degeneration," she said.

There are also researchers investigating the benefits of lutein and fish oil.

Diabetes

Diabetics need to pay special attention to eye care. They are prone to getting cataracts earlier than those without diabetes, and they are at higher risk for vision loss if their diabetes is untreated or not managed well.

"Diabetes is the primary cause of blindness in the U.S. for those under 70," Crockett said.

According to Crockett, vision is affected in those with diabetes as "the blood vessels are becoming brittle and lose blood flow. We can see that when (eye doctors) look into the eye. Sometimes a laser treatment can preserve vision," she added. "It is sort of criminal in this day and age that we still are seeing that. It means that people have poor control of their blood sugar or they are not seeking care early enough or often enough."

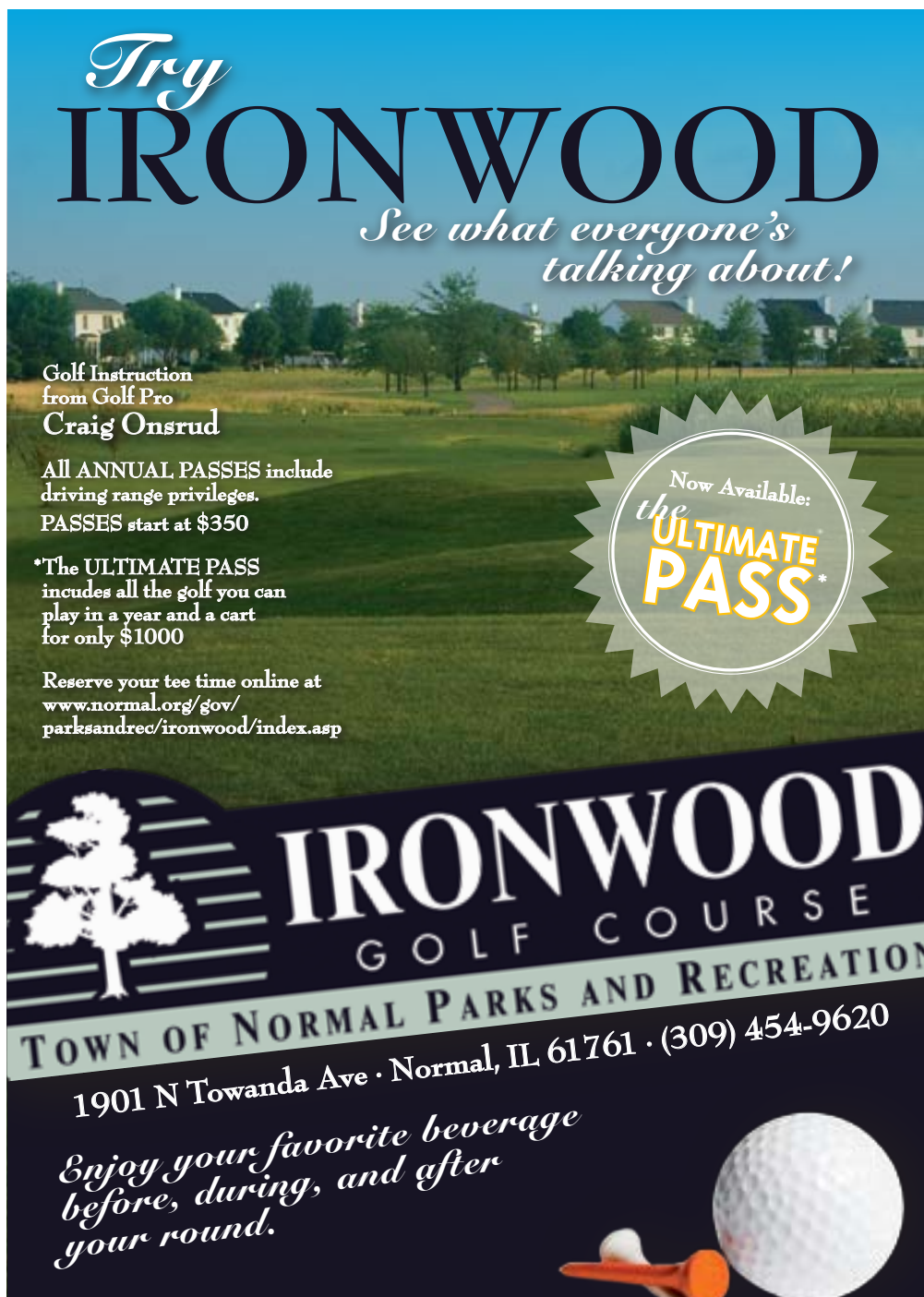
Cataracts

The condition of cataracts is defined by clouding of the eye's lens and is mostly related to aging. By age 80, more than 50 percent of the population in the United States will have a cataract or have had cataract surgery.

"Cataract surgeries are the number one billed Medicare procedures in the U.S.," Crockett noted.

During cataract surgery, a physician removes the affected lens and replaces it with a synthetic lens. Recent advances in lens technology and surgical techniques have made cataract removal easier on the patient and have expanded benefits to sight beyond elimination of the cloudiness.

"Most implant lenses will have some prescription. Now they can also come with bifocals in them," Crockett said. "Some people after surgery may not need glasses for conditions like astigma-



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tism any longer because they can be corrected with the new implant lenses."

Lasik surgery after cataract surgery may also help some people become less dependent on prescription glasses.

Glaucoma

Glaucoma results when prolonged periods of elevated fluid pressure in the eye damage the optic nerve. If untreated, it results in vision loss, sometimes even blindness. Early detection can help prevent severe vision loss.

"It is very well treated with eye drops if found early," Crockett said.

Glaucoma can also be a congenital disease. While rare, some children are born with a defect that slows the normal drainage of eye fluid and increases pressure in the eye. It can be corrected with surgery.

"Glaucoma is considered the silent thief of sight because the vast majority of cases are painless and you are not aware you have it unless you get your eyes checked," Crockett said. "Events seem to start earlier in African Americans."

And contrary to what you might suspect, high blood pressure doesn't equal elevated pressure in the eye.

"Because you have high blood pressure, you won't necessarily have glaucoma and vice versa. But beta blockers—a common blood pressure medication—used topically can control eye pressure," Crockett explained.

The National Institutes of Health indicates that those at highest risk of developing glaucoma are black and older than 40; those over 60, especially Mexican Americans; or those with a family history of the condition. This risk is especially serious for the black population because it is four times more likely to cause blindness in blacks than in whites.

Injury

It seems like common sense, but Crockett reminded that it's important to keep objects out of the eyes. In particular, she said ball activities are instances where protective eyewear is important to consider.

"A ball could come at the eye. A larger ball is less likely to injure the eye, but can injure the eye socket. A small ball, like a golf ball or a racquetball, can injure the eye. I see a lot of people play racquetball without eye protection, and that is not a good idea," she said. "I've seen injuries from all sorts of things—even badminton shuttlecocks."

Always mow or weed-whip with eye protection and always protect the eyes with safety glasses or sunglasses when doing home improvement activities, such as working with power tools or even hammering, Crockett urged. And especially be wary of fireworks.

"There are fireworks-related injuries to the eye, especially from bottle rockets, but I've seen it from roman candles," she said.

Sun Damage

Sunglasses are not just for looking cool. Those shades you wear serve an important role in protecting your eyes from sun damage.

"You need good sunglasses and/or a ball cap. Anything to protect from sun damage," Crockett

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said. "UV damage also causes cataracts to form faster. I know how hard it is to get smaller children to wear sunglasses, but you can try to do that."

Kubsch said making it fun to wear sunglasses can make it easier to get cooperation from the child.

"We sell a lot of infant and toddler sunglasses; we have a really fun line," Kubsch said. "Parents are slathering on sun block and they don't give their kids any protection for their eyes. If you start kids wearing sunglasses at a very young age, it will become a habit when they get older to protect their eyes."

All sunglass lenses have some level of UV protection, Kubsch noted.

"Transitions lenses (a variable tint lens rather than true sunglasses) change when you go outside. When you are behind the windshield, lenses won't get as dark as out in direct sunlight. A full sunglass lens will offer even more protection," she said. "Some lenses have 90 percent UV protection. The lenses we use offer 98 or 99 percent protection."

Lens color actually doesn't affect performance when it comes to UV protection according to Kubsch.

"A polarized lens that is yellow still has your UV protection, but may be for a different use," she said.

Kubsch suggests for added eye protection you might consider wearing a sport-type frame and lens when you play sports.

What the Future Looks Like

Current research holds prospects for promising developments to become reality in future eye care, Crockett said. In June of this year, very important news was reported about stem cell research and its potential uses in restoration of sight.

"Stem cells have been successfully transplanted to an eye scarred from chemical burns to help get normal vision back," she said. "Research is also underway on partial cornea transplants, only replacing some cells with the hope of culturing people's own cells."

This type of research is hoped to yield real-world results at some point. Other advances would include better ways to repair the retina.

"The retina is really an outgrowth of the brain. We haven't yet gotten to the point of being able to grow the optic nerve back," Crockett said. "Today there is research being done on video implants (much like a mini video camera) that try to bypass the eye and go right to the brain. It would bypass the structures that don't work, similar to the concept of cochlear implants for the ear."

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