

# NIH urges dilated eye exams to detect glaucoma

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The National Eye Institute (NEI), a part of the National Institutes of Health, observes Glaucoma Awareness Month each January by encouraging Americans at higher risk for glaucoma to schedule a comprehensive dilated eye exam and to make a habit of doing so every one to two years. While anyone can get glaucoma, people at higher risk include African Americans age 40 and over; adults over the age of 60, especially those who are Mexican American; and people who have a family history of the disease.

[Glaucoma](#) is a major cause of vision loss in the United States and it is becoming more prevalent as our population ages. About 2.7 million Americans 40 and older have primary open-angle glaucoma, the most common form, and this number is expected to grow. Several large studies have shown that eye pressure is a major risk factor for [optic nerve damage](#). In open-angle glaucoma pressure inside the eye rises to a level that may damage the optic nerve. When the optic nerve is damaged from increased pressure, vision loss may result. "Vision Problems in the U.S.," a report released in 2012, by Prevent Blindness America and NEI, predicts that by 2030 the disease will affect 4.2 million Americans.

Glaucoma can be detected in its early stages through a comprehensive dilated [eye exam](#) before vision loss occurs. During this exam, drops are placed in the eyes to dilate, or widen, the pupils. This allows an eye care professional to examine the optic nerve for signs of damage and other possible problems. An eye pressure test alone is not enough to detect glaucoma. People in the higher risk categories should not wait until they

notice a problem with their vision to have an eye exam. Primary open-angle glaucoma often has no symptoms in its early stages, so people may not know they have glaucoma until they start to have noticeable vision loss.

NEI leads the nation's vision research efforts and is committed to finding better prevention, detection, and treatment of eye diseases and disorders. In 2012, NEI invested \$71 million in a wide range of studies to understand causes and potential areas of treatment for glaucoma.

The broad scope of NEI-funded glaucoma research ranges from gene therapy to stem cells, drug treatments, vaccines to protect the optic nerve cells, advanced imaging tools to view the retina and optic nerve, and new techniques to study glaucoma disease mechanisms, such as new mouse models that simulate glaucoma. These models enable scientists to study how increased [eye pressure](#) causes optic nerve cell death. For more information about glaucoma research programs at NEI, visit [www.nei.nih.gov](http://www.nei.nih.gov).

Provided by National Institutes of Health

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