

by Alice Robeson, MPH

## ***The Eyes Have It!***

We all have heard that too much exposure to the sun and its ultraviolet radiation is bad for the skin – it is the leading cause of skin cancer. But did you know that UV radiation is also bad for your eyes? The same radiation that can cause skin cancer may also contribute to blindness!

Two major causes of vision loss in adults are cataracts and macular degeneration. There is some evidence that sun exposure may be linked to both. Cataracts are the leading cause of blindness worldwide. Most people will develop cataracts as a result of aging, but repeated exposure to UV radiation can speed up that process. Other contributing causes of cataracts are smoking, eye injuries and the complications of diabetes. You can also inherit a risk for some kinds of cataracts.

When cataracts form they affect the lens of the eye, making it cloudy. When cataracts first start to develop, the changes are so minor that many people don't even notice them. Over time, though, these changes become more dramatic. They can cause blurring vision, poor night vision, sensitivity to light and even double vision in the affected eye.

There is no medical treatment for cataracts, but they can be removed surgically. The best way to know if you have cataracts is to have regular eye exams. For most adults every other year exams are fine, but if you notice any of the symptoms listed above, don't wait to get them checked out.

Macular Degeneration (MD) is another leading cause of blindness, especially in those over the age of 65. The connection between UV exposure and macular degeneration is less clear cut. What is known is that people with lighter colored eyes seem to be at greater risk for macular degeneration. Other causes include aging, high blood pressure, diet, genetics, and use of certain drugs. A lack of certain nutrients may also contribute to MD.

The macula is a part of the retina of the eye. It is needed to form a sharp image in the center of your field of vision. The macula is vital to your ability to see things in front of you. As it breaks down, or degenerates, you lose the ability to see things straight ahead of you. Reading and driving, sewing and other common hobbies all require healthy macula. Currently, there is no surgery and only limited drug therapy to reverse this disabling condition.

So what can we do to protect ourselves from these and other eye conditions? Here are some suggestions:

- Get regular eye exams
- Protect your eyes from UV radiation by using good sun glasses
- Know your family history of eye conditions – and let your doctor know too!
- Eat healthfully
- Be aware of small changes in your vision that may point to a problem
- Protect your eyes from other hazards – wear safety glasses when engaged in risky activities.

Most of all, enjoy the beauty that surrounds us in the Finger Lakes, and remember that vision is a gift that we need to cherish and protect.

**As always...Prevention is Power!**