

Eye Health in Women - A Worldwide Scenario

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Abstract

Women contribute to more than 66% of the total blind and 63% of visually impaired person. Gender inequalities and poverty are directly responsible for less accessibility in women eye health. According to global blindness scenario for women, the four common eye diseases that causes vision loss are: age related macular degeneration (65%), glaucoma (61%), cataract (61%) and refractive error (56%). Other causes are: diabetic retinopathy, dry eye, autoimmune diseases, cancer and household trauma. As one out of every four women has not had an eye examination in previous two years, so April, 2021 has been declared as "Women Eye Health and Safety Month". The goal of this month is to increase awareness in women eye health, ensure regular eye checkup, provide the information regarding eye disease prevention and appropriate treatment and decrease overall reduction of vision. Many of the blindness are preventable by taking some suitable timely measures and thus sight can be saved in women.

Keywords: Women Eye Health; Common Eye Disease in Women; Gender Inequalities; Women Eye Health and Safety Month

Background

Women contribute to the foremost portion of our society. They are holding an important role in upgrading the economy yet maintaining their family. Women are often deprived of health care due to social inequalities and taboos. Women's eye health warrants special care for lots of reasons. According to Mary Elizabeth Hartnett, MD, of the John A. Moran Eye Center, "We need to engage women in caring for their eye health. Women may be less likely to

access health care for themselves, for example, if they forego regular exams to manage family concerns or take care of others instead of themselves" [1]. Eye health of women is a significant issue as the reduced vision directly impacts their family life; thus, they become a social burden. Poverty is another crucial factor contributing to less accessibility of women eye health, especially in developing countries. Many of the blindness is avoidable that can be easily prevented by taking some appropriate measures.

Women are more susceptible to eye disease and vision impairment

Women represent more than 66% of the total populace of blind and visually impaired persons [2]. The Women's Eye Health organization and their website were initiated by a group of doctors and researchers to provide women with the information they need to comprehend their danger, protect their vision, improve their vision, and empower their families. The National Eye Health Education Program and Women in Ophthalmology collaborated to create this website, which features content written by women for women [3]. The World Health Organization (WHO) and The International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB) are working mainly on women's eye health. The WHO acknowledges that gender is an important determinant of health in two dimensions [4]:

- Gender inequality puts women and girls' well-being at risk, and
- Addressing gender expectations and roles leads to a greater understanding of how men and women in different age and social classes are affected by threats, health-seeking attitudes, and health outcomes as a result of social construction of identity and unbalanced power relations.

Thus, the IAPB started a campaign on "A guide to gender-responsive eye health programming" to provide equal eye health facilities to women and girls [5].

Common eye disease scenario in women

Most women are aware of the importance of going to the doctor on a regular basis. Many women, however, are unaware that this often entails having their eyes examined. Women live longer than men, which makes them more vulnerable to eye diseases. According to recent WHO results, the prevalence of smoking is more in females than males [6]. This is significant because the following eye diseases and disorders are more common in women.

The top four eye diseases that can cause vision loss are as follows [7]:

1. Macular degeneration
2. Glaucoma
3. Cataracts
4. Diabetic retinopathy.

Other eye diseases in women are [7]:

- **Dry eyes:** Women can experience hormonal imbalances as they age, especially around menopause, leading to dry eye syndrome. Most ageing adults leave chronic dry eye untreated, although women are 2 - 3 times more likely to be affected.
- **Refractive errors:** Women are more likely than men to develop refractive errors such as nearsightedness, farsightedness, and astigmatism, in addition to the four primary eye diseases stated above. Prescription glasses, contact lenses, or LASIK may all be used to correct refractive errors.
- **Visual impairments and blindness:** Age-related eye disorders are the leading cause of vision impairment and blindness. In the next three decades, the number of Americans with age-related eye disorders is projected to double, according to statistics from 2012.
- **Impact of other systemic health conditions:** Women are more susceptible to a variety of eye disorders, as well as a number of health problems that can impair vision. These include:
 - **Diabetes:** Diabetes affects one out of every ten American women over the age of 20. Women who have had gestational diabetes are also more likely to develop diabetes in the next 5 - 10 years, with a (40 - 60%) risk of doing so, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [8].
 - Autoimmune diseases, such as multiple sclerosis, Sjögren syndrome, SLE and rheumatoid arthritis.
 - Multiple sclerosis causes temporary eye burning and, in some cases, vision loss.
 - Sjögren's syndrome causes the body's moisture-producing glands to dry out.
- **Cancer:** Cataracts and dry eyes are side effects of some cancer therapies.
- **Eye injuries:** Household trauma and chemical burns, such as lime burn and acid burn, are more common in women. Due to gender disparities, many of them arrive at the hospital late, resulting in a bad visual outcome.

Summary of global visual impairment scenario in women eye health

Women are more prone to reduce vision than men [9]. Figure 1 portrays the global visual impairment scenario in women.

Figure 1: Women are more prone to reduce vision than men.

Less likely to access health care

According to a survey conducted by Prevent Blindness, less than 10% of women are aware that they are at a higher risk of permanent vision loss than men; 86% wrongly believe that both men and women are equally vulnerable and 5% believe that men are at higher risk. According to the same report, one out of every four women has not had an eye exam in the previous two years [1].

Women eye health and safety month (April 2021)

In April, women's eye health and safety month are commemorated to educate women about the measures they can take to prevent vision loss [10-12]. The priorities are:

- a. "Women's eye health and safety month" informs women that those aged 40 and over should make a dilated eye exam a priority in order to avoid vision loss.
- b. Any time a vision change is observed, a dilated eye test is strongly recommended. iii. There are five times as many women as men living at the age of 90.
- c. Studies show that age-related macular degeneration, cataracts, glaucoma, and diabetic retinopathy, the four most common eye diseases globally, affect more women than men.
- d. Women are also more likely than men to develop sight-threatening autoimmune conditions, including multiple sclerosis, lupus, and rheumatoid arthritis, which can cause blindness.

Prevention is better than cure

Women should take measures to protect their eyes by following the below mentioned procedures [1]:

- a. Get a regular vision check by a health care professional. If the first time checkup is okay, then an annual checkup is necessary.
- b. Get a dilated eye test: The best way to tell whether the eyes are safe and the vision is clear is to get a dilated eye exam. The patient should discuss their daily checkup schedule with an eye care professional.
- c. Maintain a balanced diet: Consume plenty of fresh fruits and green, leafy vegetables, as well as salmon, tuna, and other oily fish, to reduce the risk of eye disease. Eggs, nuts, beans, and other nonmeat protein sources can all be included in the diet.
- d. Control chronic problems such as diabetes, hypertension, obesity, and depression by maintaining a healthy weight.
- e. Stop smoking. AMD, cataracts, and glaucoma are all related to smoking.
- f. Keeping contact lenses clean and safe is a must.
- g. History of the family and proper counselling: Many eye disorders, such as retinitis pigmentosa and glaucoma, are inherited.
- h. When doing household chores or gardening, playing sports, or working on a job that includes flying glass, sparks, or chemicals, wear protective eyewear. Wear polycarbonate made protective glasses, goggles, shields, or eye guards.
- i. Putting on sunglasses. Sunglasses shield the eyes from harmful ultraviolet rays. Long-term sun exposure will raise the risk of cataracts and AMD.

Conclusion

Poverty is both a cause and a consequence of poor eye health and it is especially problematic for women in developing countries.

Women bear a larger share of the burden of blindness. Gender imbalances may be exacerbated by vision loss. Women who are aware of their right to sight will have more and more balanced access to beneficial results and contribute more economically, socially, and culturally to their communities, resulting in greater gender equality. Women's eye health would benefit socially and economically if gender inequality was appropriately addressed.

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