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Driving blind

World Glaucoma Week was established in 2008 as a global event to raise awareness of the world's leading cause of irreversible blindness. This year World Glaucoma Week (6 – 12 March) focuses on the significant impact untreated glaucoma can have on our ability to drive safely.

The word “glaucoma” is derived from a Greek word, somewhat similar to the Greek word for owl – no coincidence then that a wide-eyed wise old owl forms the logo for Glaucoma Australia, the not-for-profit registered charity dedicated to providing support for glaucoma sufferers and to raise funds for research.

According to Glaucoma Australia's National Executive Officer, Beverley Lindsell, if glaucoma is not diagnosed early and treated appropriately the disease will have a severe adverse effect on an individual's ability to perform everyday tasks such as driving. She said that recent research has shown glaucoma sufferers are up to four times more likely to have a car accident than the average Australian – chiefly due to deterioration in so-called peripheral vision.

There are several different forms of glaucoma. It is the name given to a group of eye diseases where the optic nerve at the back of the eye is damaged. The damage is caused when pressure in the eyeball rises due to a build up of fluid. This fluid build-up takes place either because too much fluid is formed or because the canals in the eye, which normally drain the fluid away, don't work properly.

Unfortunately, glaucoma can't be cured. Once there is damage to the nerve cells in the eye, repair is not possible. However, the serious consequences of glaucoma can be prevented if the condition is discovered soon enough; and early treatment, usually with eye drops to stabilise the pressure in the eye, can help avoid further loss of sight.

Glaucoma is very much a family affair. If someone in your family has or had glaucoma you're almost three times more likely to have glaucoma yourself. And that risk increases as you get older.

You are also at greater risk of getting glaucoma if you have diabetes or high blood pressure, if you are short-sighted or if you get migraine headaches.

In the early stages of glaucoma, most people experience no symptoms, even when losing their sight; however, some people may notice a need to change their glasses more often, perhaps find it hard to see in dark rooms, lose wide vision, or have blurred sight.

So if your sight is hazy or blurred, or your eyes are difficult to focus, it's clearly important to see your optometrist or ophthalmologist for a check up.

The only way to prevent complete loss of vision is early detection and treatment.

The major message coming from Glaucoma Australia is that all Australians aged 40 and over must have their eyes checked at least every two years by an optometrist or ophthalmologist - even more regularly if they have a family history of the condition, hypertension, diabetes or a former eye injury.

If you have glaucoma and are using drops, make sure you know how your eye medicines work so as to get the most benefit from them. It's been estimated that 10% of vision loss from glaucoma is because prescribed eye drops are not used properly.

Up-to-date information about glaucoma is available by way of the new *Vision Impairment* fact card, which you can obtain from pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care health information. And there is some extra information especially on glaucoma which your pharmacist can print out for you. This information also gives some helpful hints on how eye drops should be applied.

For the location of the “Self Care” pharmacy nearest you, call the Pharmaceutical Society on 1 300 369 772 or check out the Pharmaceutical Society website: www.psa.org.au.