



Glaucoma: People of African and Hispanic Ancestry Are at Higher Risk

If you are of African or Hispanic ancestry and especially if you have a known family member with **glaucoma**, you are at a higher risk for vision loss from this eye disease.

Glaucoma is a disease of the optic nerve, which transmits the images you see from the eye to the brain. The optic nerve is made up of numerous nerve fibers (like an electric cable made up of many wires). Glaucoma damages nerve fibers, which can cause blind spots and loss of vision.

Glaucoma has to do with the pressure inside the eye, or intraocular pressure (IOP). When the aqueous humor (the clear liquid that normally flows in and out of the eye) cannot drain properly, pressure builds up in the eye. The resulting increase in IOP can damage the optic nerve.

Primary open-angle glaucoma is the leading cause of blindness among people of African ancestry, occurring at a rate four times higher than among Caucasian patients. It also occurs about 10 years earlier among people of African ancestry than among Caucasians and develops more rapidly. Studies show that in the United States, African Americans between the ages of 45 and 64 are approximately 15 times more likely to go blind from glaucoma than Caucasians with glaucoma in the same age group. Primary open-angle glaucoma is also the leading cause of blindness among people of Hispanic (and especially Mexican) ancestry, occurring at a rate approaching that of people of African ancestry.

It is not clear why people of African ancestry have higher rates of glaucoma and subsequent blindness than Caucasians. One factor may be that they are more susceptible to developing elevated IOP earlier in life, which is thought to contribute to optic nerve damage and eventual vision loss. Another reason may be that they are less likely than Caucasians to have early eye examinations that might detect and treat glaucoma. This also may be a factor in the increased rate of glaucoma among Hispanics.

Glaucoma causes no symptoms early in its course; you will not experience pain or vision changes while it is developing. The best way to protect yourself and your family members against vision loss from glaucoma is by being aware of your higher risk of developing this disease and by having regular eye examinations for glaucoma at appropriate intervals.

Recommended intervals for a comprehensive eye evaluation in people of African ancestry are as follows:

- 20 to 29 years of age: every 3 to 5 years;
- 30 to 64 years of age: every 2 to 4 years;
- 65 years and older: every 1 to 2 years.

It is also recommended that people of Hispanic ancestry have regular, comprehensive eye evaluations. This is especially important after age 60.

If you are diagnosed with glaucoma, please make sure to tell your family members and urge them to have an eye exam for glaucoma.

Here are some resources for more information on glaucoma:

The Glaucoma Foundation
80 Maiden Lane, Suite 1206
New York, NY 10038
Phone: 800.GLAUCOMA (452.8266)
www.glaucoma-foundation.org

The National Eye Institute
2020 Vision Place
Bethesda, MD 20892-3655
Phone: 301.496.5248
www.nei.nih.gov

Prevent Blindness America
Phone: 800.331.2020
www.preventblindness.org

The American Academy of Ophthalmology
P.O. Box 7424
San Francisco, CA 94120-7424
www.aao.org