

THIS MONTH: EYE HEALTH

No Flavors this week

Today's NH Medical section takes the place of the weekly Flavors section. Flavors, along with Our Gourmet, will return next Wednesday.

Explore your options to keep costs in focus when buying glasses

By Victor Stefanescu
The Minnesota Star Tribune

On a recent cloudy winter Sunday, Peg McCormick, 72, was picking up a pair of sunglasses at Warby Parker in Minneapolis for an upcoming snow-escaping trip to Mexico.

Though she has purchased glasses from the retail chain for years, her resounding review of the process in general: "I hate buying eyeglasses. I hate it."

McCormick is one example of the stress glasses-wearers encounter when trying to find a pair of lenses that not only look good enough to be an everyday accessory but don't cost a fortune. Now that the Federal Trade Commission is doubling down on its rule requiring eye doctors to provide their patients prescriptions after eye exams, consumers like McCormick are encountering more options for their purchases than just those in their doctor's office lobby.

Glasses retailer Warby Parker is posting record annual profit, and some consumers are looking toward online outlets like Zenni Optical to fill their prescriptions.

Costwise, a 2022 Consumer Reports survey with 11,450 respondents found people paid a median of \$224 out of pocket or \$205 after insurance for glasses. The median price was higher at traditional optical shops, costing people \$511 out of pocket. Consumers still face costly fees and financing, said Sally Greenberg, chief executive officer of the National Consumers League.

"The industry has cleaned up a lot," Greenberg said. "But you do have to watch out, because like any industry, they're going to add fees if they can get away with it."

Here's how experts suggest you avoid steep costs and still look like an enchanting, mysterious intellectual in your next pair.

Before your appointment

First of all, familiarize yourself with the different kinds of eye docs: optometrists and ophthalmologists. Optometrists diagnose and treat eye diseases and vision problems while ophthalmologists provide total eye care and perform surgery, according to the Cleveland Clinic.

Greenberg recommended people to go to eye specialists like those once a year, as they detect more than 200 conditions and diseases like macular degeneration, diabetes and brain tumors.

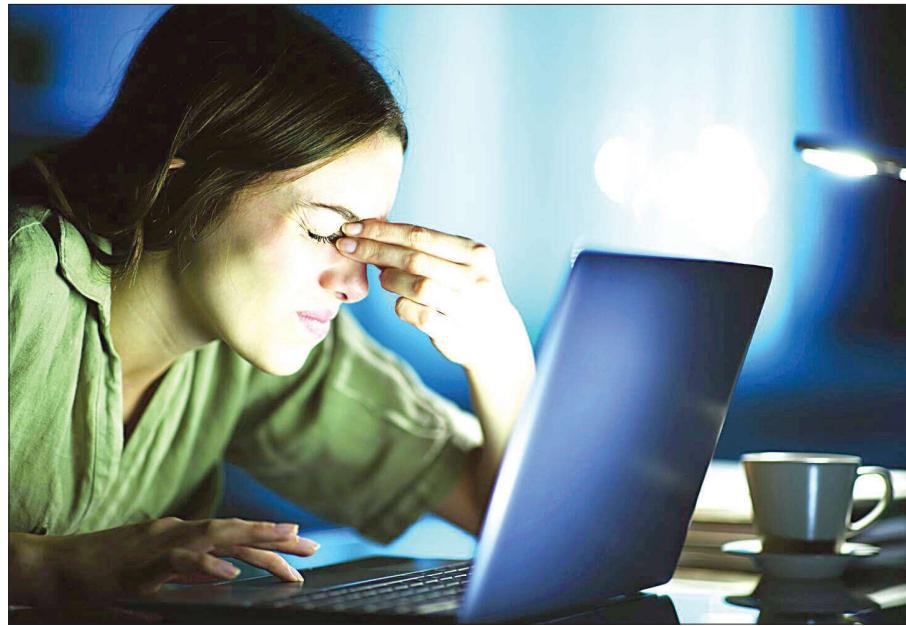
Before heading to her appointment at these traditional doctor offices that often sell glasses, too, Greenberg likes to ask: "What will the exam cost? Are there any additional costs attached? What is the average price of glasses?"

Ruth Susswein, advocacy group Consumer Action's director of consumer protection, said those providers often attach extra services and fees to the cost of a vision test. To weed out services that might be costly and unnecessary, Susswein suggested consumers ask: "What is that test? Why do I need that?"

Whenever Greenberg encounters a surprise fee, she simply says: "I don't want to pay that." A few years ago, when she complained about a "refraction fee," it was missing from the bill a year later, she said.

Know the rules

A Federal Trade Commission rule has required doctors to provide patients copies of their prescription after an eye exam since 1978. The agency has long received com-



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According to the American Academy of Ophthalmology, there is no scientific evidence that light from screens is harmful. It's the time we spend using and viewing electronic devices, especially at close range with less time looking at anything distant, that can cause problems.

Is all this screen time straining our vision? The answer is yes. Here's what to do.

By Roberta Baker
Union Leader Staff

CELLPHONES, tablets, laptops, gaming devices — screens are in use around the clock while we learn, work, relax and interact. The amount of time we spend tuned into them has grown since the pandemic, and it isn't lessening.

The average American spends roughly seven hours every day in front of some type of screen.

A 2022 survey for the American Optometric Association found that the average gamer spends more than eight hours daily.

According to a 2024 report from the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, children ages 8-12 in the United States, on average, spend four to six hours a day watching or using screens, one hour more than 10 years ago.

Teens are up to nine hours a day.

What's all this screen time doing to our vision?

How do we keep our eyes healthy and fit?

According to the American Academy of Ophthalmology,



Dr. Christine Donahue, left, of Manchester-Bedford Eye Care, demonstrates an eye exam with her co-worker, Marissa Jackson, on Thursday. She was using a slit lamp microscope, a tool for detecting eye disease and checking on eye health as part of the demonstration.

there is no scientific evidence that light from screens is harmful. It's the time we spend using and viewing electronic devices, especially at close range, with less time looking at anything distant.

Computer vision syndrome, aka digital eyestrain

Prolonged use of electronic devices, according to vision experts, is contributing to computer vision syndrome, a clus-

ter of symptoms that includes headaches, eye discomfort, eye strain, dry eyes and blurred vision. At greatest risk, according to the Optometric Association,

► See Eye Strain, Page B4

Common eye diseases warrant early detection

By Roberta Baker
Union Leader Staff

We don't pay much attention to our eyes until there's a problem. Most of us wait until daily life or reading becomes blurry, "floaters" invade our vision or glare from the headlights of oncoming cars make it risky to drive at night.

Many eye conditions develop slowly as we age and go unnoticed until sight is compromised. Some are inevitable and irreversible. Others can be treated, delayed or fixed by surgery.

That's why it's important to get regular eye checkups, even if you don't wear glasses.

Nearsightedness has nearly doubled in the United States since 1971, according to the American Academy of Ophthalmology.



"Cataracts are a natural part of aging. They're not preventable," said Dr. Janet Aug, an optometrist at Dartmouth Health's Cheshire Medical Center.

Here's a guide to the most common ailments that can arise as we grow older.

Cataracts

Think of cataracts as a fact

an ophthalmologist at Nashua Eye Associates, who specializes in cataract removal.

"Cataracts are a natural part of aging. They're not preventable," said Dr. Janet Aug, an optometrist at Dartmouth Health's Cheshire Medical Center. "Everybody on the planet gets cataracts over time."

Ultraviolet (UV) light protection can help slow their formation. With cataracts, the lens of the eye gets cloudy over time until so little light comes in that it becomes nearly impossible to see.

"Like the plastic rear car window on a convertible. It starts out clear and gets yellow and cloudy over time," said Aug. "Even light has trouble getting through."

► See Eye Diseases, Page B3

► See Glasses, Page B2

Glasses

From Page B1

plaints that doctors did not comply with the rule, it said in a news release earlier this year.

In the past, Greenberg said optometrists and ophthalmologists could limit options for patients who came in for eye exams, holding them back from shopping around by not providing the prescription. Without prescriptions, Susswein said consumers often settled on buying glasses at the optical office before considering other options.

"If you didn't know, as a consumer, that you were entitled to it ... you might not know to ask for it," Greenberg said.

The agency changed the rule this summer, requiring doctors to request their patients to sign a statement confirming they received their prescription, the news release said.

Consumers who don't receive their prescription should ask for a copy, Susswein said.

Assess your options

If consumers aren't satisfied with offerings from their eye doctors, they can take their prescription elsewhere.

"We have so many options these days of where to buy eyeglasses and contact lenses," Susswein said. "And that competition leads to lower prices and more affordability and more choice. And that is what is best for consumers."

Glasses varieties vary widely. Reading glasses, available without a prescription at general retailers like Target for less than \$20, can help people focus on small text as they age and the lenses inside their eyes become more rigid.

Prescription glasses, which tend to be much more expensive, correct a patient's specific vision problems. Some of them,

called bifocals and trifocals, can contain multiple prescriptions correcting both nearsightedness and farsightedness in a single pair.

Check with your health insurance plan administrator or workplace benefits manager on how you can use your FSA and HSA dollars for glasses. People can typically use these funds to pay for vision expenses, such as reading glasses, beyond what vision insurance covers, like annual eye exams.

Do your research

Greenberg said consumers should check online comments for low-cost glasses retailers like 1-800 Contacts to verify they consistently fill the right prescription. A consumer can occasionally receive the wrong one, she said.

Greenberg said consumers are often offered add-ons like anti-glare, UV protection and scratch-resistant coating. Susswein said eye doctors should disclose the costs of these extras. But make sure you only pay for extras you want.

Consumers should check the terms of the return policy before making a purchase, Greenberg said, and avoid financing options if at all possible.

"We never like financing because oftentimes, those are very onerous and predatory terms," Greenberg said.

Seek opinions

Schultz said the options at his eye doctor's office fell short, so he asked for a printed copy of his prescription and brought it to Warby Parker.

Elizabeth Firestone, another customer at the Warby Parker, said the retailer's app allowed her to virtually try on pairs. In the store, she said, staff helped her make adjustments.

Keep your eyes safe: What to avoid

By Avery Newmark
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports about 93 million adults in the United States are at high risk for serious vision loss, with only half visiting an eye doctor in the past year.

Often, in the pursuit of beauty, our eyes take center stage.

Dr. Jennifer Tsai, a board-certified optometrist based in Manhattan, is bridging the gap between eye health and beauty.

Through a series of TikTok videos, Tsai draws from her clinical experience and medical training to educate her audience. In a recent video, she highlights things she would personally never do around her eyes:



cleansing around the eyes to remove all traces of makeup. Skipping this step can lead to clogged oil glands, resulting in long-term dryness and other eye-related issues.

Swim with contacts

Whether you're in a pool, lake or hot tub, swimming with contact lenses is a definite no, according to Tsai. When you do so, you're increasing your risk of acanthamoeba keratitis, a rare but severe infection that can lead to vision loss. This condition occurs when the organism acanthamoeba, commonly found in water, becomes trapped between the lens and your eye.

By avoiding these practices, you can significantly reduce the risk of eye infections, irritations and long-term damage.

Optometrists say lash extensions come with significant risks, including potential lash loss, sties and infections.

Get lash extensions

Lash extensions may enhance your eyes, but they come with significant risks. Tsai warns of potential lash loss, sties and infections associated with these beauty treatments.

TikTok user @lexmakeupxo commented on the

video, "You lost me at lash extensions," to which Tsai advised, "It's never a no, but take some breaks, please!"

Skip makeup removal

Leaving eye makeup on overnight is a common but harmful habit. Tsai stresses the importance of double-

Is it true that stress causes your eyelid to twitch?

By Lindsey Bever
The Washington Post

Many people have experienced it — that twitch that causes an eyelid to wiggle for several seconds.

Twitches of the eyelid muscles may feel weird but are typically harmless and have been associated with stress, lack of sleep and caffeine use, among other culprits.

The exact mechanism that causes the twitch is not completely understood, but it occurs randomly and usually resolves within seconds, ophthalmologists said.

The eyelid muscle responsible for opening and closing the eyelid, the orbicularis oculi, "is the fastest-working muscle in the human body, so

when it goes into a spasm, it goes into a spasm," said Stephanie Marioneaux, an ophthalmologist and a spokeswoman for the American Academy of Ophthalmology. The muscle can close an eyelid in less than 100 milliseconds and reopen it in about 200 milliseconds.

In rare cases, eyelid spasms may be debilitating and require treatment. A blepharospasm causes one or both eyes to close involuntarily.

Although benign, blepharospasms can become chronic and, over time, increase in frequency, making it difficult to perform daily tasks.

With hemifacial spasms, a neuromuscular disorder, an eyelid spasm progresses to incorporate the brow and muscles in the lower

face, often pulling the mouth to one side.

Eye spasms differ

from eyeball spasms, ophthalmologists said. If it appears that the world is moving with each spasm, consult an ophthalmologist or neurologist.

A simple eye twitch does

not require treatment.

If the twitches persist or start to involve other muscles in the face, consult an ophthalmologist.

Blepharospasms and hemifacial spasms can be treated with regular injections of botulinum toxin.

Also known by the brand name Botox, the medication produced from the bacterium Clostridium botulinum, temporarily blocks nerves thereby weakening or paralyzing certain muscles.

In severe cases of bleph-

arospasms that do not respond to the injections or for people who are afraid of needles, deep brain stimulation implantation may be considered, said Andrew Carey, associate professor of ophthalmology and neurology at Johns Hopkins University.

Microvascular decompression surgery may be considered in some cases for hemifacial spasms to relieve pressure on the facial nerve causing the spasms, but surgical options are invasive and can carry certain risks, ophthalmologists said.

The bottom line?

Eyelid twitches are typically harmless. But if the twitch bothers you, try to reduce stress, get enough sleep and lower caffeine intake, medical professionals said.

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Eye Diseases

From Page B1

The solution? "Cataracts need to be removed," she said.

Of four common conditions that arise with age — including glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy and macular degeneration — cataracts are the one that are often not treated surgically until vision is truly compromised in the late stages. They develop very slowly, often without raising any alarms. Regular eye checkups are key, starting in middle age.

Parikh said most cataract surgeries are done between ages 65 and 85, and they're often life-changing.

"You don't only return them to their baseline," he said. "You improve on their baseline. They need less-strong glasses if any at all."

He said cataract patients frequently say, "I wish I had done this sooner." Regular vision checkups are important, he said, especially as most people experience trouble reading after age 40.

According to the Mayo Clinic, waiting to have cataract surgery won't harm your eye.

The clinic recommends asking these questions before seeking cataract surgery: Do bright lights make it tough to see? Can you see well enough to do your job and drive? Do you have trouble reading or watching TV? Are cataracts making it difficult to cook, shop, do yard work or hobbies or take medicine? Is your independence at risk?

During cataract surgery, an ultrasound probe may be used to break up your cloudy lens before it's removed. The lens capsule stays intact to receive the artificial lens implant.

Stitches are sometimes used to close an incision made in your cornea.

Significant improvements in lens implants mean cataracts don't have to cause blindness. And there are now more options for people with astigmatism or who struggle to see far away or up close.

Once a cataract surgeon removes the cloudy natural lens and puts an artificial one in its place, it's there for the rest of your life, said Aug.



is unknown. After initial diagnosis, significant vision loss usually occurs within 10 years.

The early warning signs, according to Wesson and Mother-shed Eye Center in England, include blurred or distorted vision in the center of your vision, difficulty reading, recognizing faces and seeing fine details. Straight lines can appear wavy or crooked. You can have sensitivity to bright lights and see flickering or flashing lights.

Studies have found the highest incidence in Florida, the Midwest and New England.

The macula is the part of the eye that lets us read and see details and colors. Particles called drusen deposits build up and create problems for the macula.

Both glaucoma and macular degeneration are slow-moving and you may not realize they're happening, said Parikh.

Risk factors include smoking (there's a direct link), overexposure to UV light, genetic susceptibility, diets high in saturated fats and being overweight. Females get it more than males, according to research.

There are two forms of macular degeneration. Most common is the dry form.

The wet form is caused by bleeding, and injections from a retinal specialist can stop the bleeding and improve your condition, although it can't cure it.

Lifestyle habits have a bearing. It's important to stop smoking, eat healthy and lose weight if you're overweight. AREDS, a dietary supplement, can help to slow macular degeneration. A study by the Journal of the American Medical Association, found that 3 mg of melatonin might prove helpful.

Diabetic retinopathy

About 9.6 million Americans who have type 1 or type 2 diabetes also suffer from diabetic retinopathy, which occurs when leaky blood vessels hemorrhage behind the eye, triggering vision loss and swelling.

The biggest treatment and prevention is keeping your blood sugar under control, said Aug, and getting yearly eye exams.

Many eye conditions develop slowly as we age and go unnoticed until sight is compromised. That's why it's important to get regular eye checkups, even if you don't wear glasses.

Glaucoma

Glaucoma is a disease process not a natural product of getting older. Roughly 4.2% of the population gets glaucoma, and there's a strong genetic link, said Aug. In later stages it can produce an experience of tunnel vision. Peripheral vision gets blurry. Untreated, glaucoma can cause blindness.

Glaucoma, macular degeneration and diabetic retinopathy are all preventable to varying degrees. "That's why it's important to come in for regular eye exams, even if you haven't noticed any issues," said Parikh.

"There are no signs when it's really early. People can't feel it, and they don't notice the vision changes until it gets really severe," said Dr. Faith Birnbaum, an ophthalmologist and glaucoma specialist at Nashua Eye. "There are no signs that a patient can detect."

Juvenile open-angle glaucoma can occur in the 30s and 40s. The risk of primary open-angle glaucoma, the most common form,

increases in the 60s. Starting at age 60, it's important to get yearly eye exams "even if you don't wear glasses," Birnbaum said.

A significant percentage of patients develop glaucoma as a result of damage to the nerve in back of the eye. "They can't feel and see it happening until the end stage. That's why it's important to see your eye doctor yearly," said Aug.

Glaucoma most often strikes people age 55 and older. Aug said, and there's no proven way to lessen your risk.

Risk increases with a first-generation family history (parents and siblings with glaucoma), eye trauma, steroid use such as inhalers for asthma, and diabetes, said Birnbaum.

It's historically been treated with eye drops, said Aug, but now in-office lasers can open the drainage area of the eye, allowing more fluid to flow out.

In minimally invasive surgery, a set of procedures are done to boost drainage and decrease pressure on the eye, Birnbaum said.

It's a disease of the optic nerve, treated by reducing pressure. It's possible to have normal pressure and still have glaucoma, said Aug. It's diagnosed by testing and scanning the eye.

"Our goal is to slow" glaucoma down "so you don't lose your vision during your lifetime," said Aug.

Macular degeneration

Age-related macular degeneration is the top cause of vision loss and legal blindness in U.S. adults over 60, according to the Mayo Clinic. More than one in three seniors over 75 are likely to show signs of it, and more than 200,000 new cases are diagnosed each year.

John Hopkins Medicine states that it's the most common cause of severe eyesight loss in adults 50 and older.

Roughly 20 million Americans have macular degeneration.

Roughly 1 in 10 Americans age 50 and older have early-stage macular degeneration, according to preventblindness.org.

It's not reversible and the cause

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Solid bipartisan efforts to improve care funding must continue under Gov. Ayotte. Through October 2024, wage costs alone for nursing homes were up 31% since March 2020. If facilities can't afford to hire staff within the limits of their Medicaid reimbursement they must deny admissions. This can prevent hospitals from discharging patients, and forces waiting for vital care.

For more information, see savenhseniors.com

MORE HELP in Concord is needed so facilities can recruit, and retain, staff to serve the most vulnerable Granite Staters.

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Eye Strain

From Page B1

are people who spend two or more continuous hours every day on computers or handheld devices. The more time you spend, the longer the symptoms can take to subside. And the more discomfort you feel.

It's a digital world, so what should we do?

The American Optometric Association says to start with computer hygiene:

- Adjust your screen settings to reduce the glare caused by light reflecting from the surface.
- Room lighting should be about the same as your screen brightness — not brighter or dimmer.
- Cut down on glare by moving away from a window, or turn your desk or computer so outside light isn't reflecting.
- Use zoom to see details and fine print.
- Keep your face at least 13 to 20 inches away from your smartphone, small tablet or small laptop — and more than 20 inches away from larger screens.
- Take a 15-minute break for every two hours that you spend viewing an electronic device.

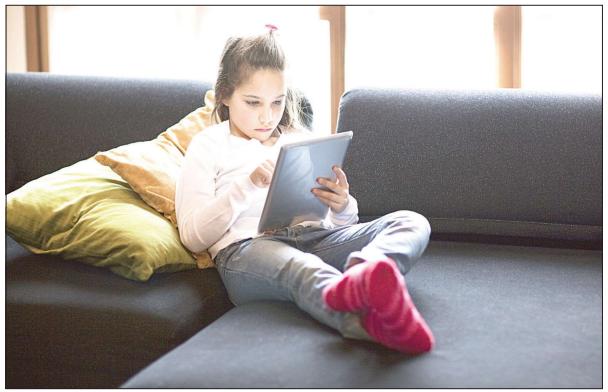
Blink often

People normally blink about 15 times a minute. But when we're on computers and other digital technology including cellphones, we're only blinking five to seven times a minute, according to the American Academy of Ophthalmology.

"We don't blink as much as when we're speaking to someone in person," said Dr. Janet Aug, an optometrist at Dartmouth Health's Cheshire Medical Center. As a result, we're getting dry eyes — and that causes pain and discomfort as well as fluctuating vision.

It comes down to tears

"After age 40, we don't



Developing eyes are especially sensitive to long periods of screen time.

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secrete as many tears," said Dr. Christine Donahue, an optometrist at Manchester-Bedford Eye Center. "Children have beautiful, copious amounts of tears. But once you get into middle age, it can be a problem."

Blinking redistributes the tear film over your eye, which keeps it lubricated and working. "When people aren't blinking, tears are just evaporating off the surface," she said.

So, when you're on the computer, blink as often as possible — even if it means taping a note to your screen to that says "Blink." During winter, use humidifiers to reduce the effects of dry indoor air. Use preservative-free artificial tears to moisten your eyes when they feel dry, irritated, scratchy or gritty.

As a result of increased screen time across all ages, "We have many more cases of dry eye than we used to," said Donahue.

Dr. Laura Voicu, an ophthalmologist at Nashua Eye Associates, said many patients complain, "I can't read for any period of

time" or "I'm reading and a second later I can't see" or "I can read for 20 minutes, then I can't read any more."

"It's very common for people to say they can't read at night," Voicu said. "Evaporative dry eye gets worse all day long, progressing."

She recommends artificial tears that contain an oil component. Use a heated compress or heated dry mask to liquefy the oil inside the gland and bring it to the eye surface.

Sometimes eyes become dry, red and irritated because of mites that commonly live in eyelashes and can cause inflammation.

For that, Voicu recommends applying an eyelid cleanser to the margins of the eyelids.

Take breaks

Constant close-up screen time can wreak havoc with distance vision. Rates of nearsightedness are rocketing in children. A study published recently in the Journal of the American Medical Association suggests that our lack of going outdoors and seeing things far away is becoming a widespread problem.

By 2050, half the world's population is predicted to be nearsighted. In Asia, up to 90% of adults and teens are nearsighted now.

It's important to take regular breaks and look far away.

"Look down the hallway. Look out the window. Walk to the restroom," said Donahue at Manchester-Bedford Eye. "Limit screen time as much as you can. And push (the screens) further away from your nose."

Take breaks from your computer and squeeze your eyes shut, said Aug.

Donahue recommends the 20-20 rule from the American Optometric Association: "Every 20 minutes, look at least 20 feet away for at least 20 seconds. That does a great job of keeping the focusing system fresh and helps it relax and prevents it from becoming stuck in a spasm," she said.

Limit screen time for kids

Developing eyes are sensitive to long periods of screen time. Young children below age 5 are

advised to limit screen time to one hour or less each day, according to recent research. Having more may increase the odds of becoming nearsighted.

Kids under 5 "shouldn't be having much screen time, with the exception of FaceTiming grandparents who live far away," said Donahue. Older children "should have a two-hour hard limit on recreational computer use."

"More near activity in early childhood that is held in the hand or close to the face can be an accelerating factor in nearsightedness," said Voicu at Nashua Eye. "Far vision activities such as playing outside are protective."

Protective eyewear

If work or school requires you to be in front of a screen for long periods of time, prescription computer glasses may be a simpler way to reduce eye strain. They allow you to focus at a typical computer screen distance, which is 20 to 26 inches from your face.

Multifocal lenses can help you switch quickly between seeing up close, at medium range and far away.

Non-glare screens and lens coatings can make it easier to see, and sunglasses with ultraviolet light protection are important year-round, including while you're driving.

"You need UV light protection all day long, year-round, even on a cloudy day," Aug said.

Healthy body, healthy eyes

Everything that you do to be healthy benefits your eyes, she added. Watch your weight, blood pressure and what you eat.

"We use our eyes so much and we only get two of them," said Donahue. "We really have to try to take care of them."

Donahue recommends

preventative measures to preserve good eyesight.

• **Stop smoking.** "It's terrible for cataracts and macular degeneration," she said.

• **Spend time outdoors with sunglasses on.** Sun-glasses "are like sunscreen lotion for your eyes."

• **Double down on healthy foods.** Eat more leafy green vegetables or dark colored fruits and vegetables, including intense orange ones such as carrots, winter squash and sweet potatoes.

• **Get regular exercise.** This boosts all body systems.

Get regular eye exams

"The eye, when it works great, we're really happy. But it doesn't give us a lot of clues that it's not working properly," Donahue said.

Get your eyes checked every year or two, especially to "catch asymptomatic diseases that crop up as we get older. The eye is a little secretive," she said. "We have to look at it through a microscope."

"If you have any kind of eye problem at all, health insurance will cover it," said Voicu at Nashua Eye. "Just like going to a primary care provider, the eye is part of the body."

Health insurance typically does not cover glasses and routine eye exams, unless specifically stated in your plan.

Some people go five to 10 years between eye check-ups because they don't wear glasses — and that's a big risk.

"There are so many things that are vision threatening or blinding and asymptomatic until the end stage," Voicu said. "If only we could get more people to with an ophthalmologist or optometrist, we could get clued into risk factors and ongoing conditions and potentially prevent them from progressing."

Dr. Alison Loranger is moving to Hooksett and accepting new patients!

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