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Marketing & Design Firm Contact:
H J Design, Inc. - Mary Helber-Jamboretz
816-415-3777

Preserving Eyesight and Bodily Health

By Dr. Kevin Skelsey

The eyes have been described as “the windows to the soul”. While that can be debated, one thing they certainly are is a window to the human body. The eye is a very unique organ that has its own special needs and conditions, but is also intimately linked to the body and has a very special relationship with the brain. Most people are familiar with the concept that regular eye exams can detect ocular diseases such as cataracts, glaucoma and macular degeneration. When caught early and treated properly, visual loss can be slowed down considerably or even reversed depending upon the specific condition. However, many people are less aware that an eye exam can be integral to a person’s overall health. The eyes can provide insight into the status of diabetes, strokes, and brain tumors, and be affected with diseases such as multiple sclerosis and rheumatoid arthritis to name just a few conditions.

With diabetes for example, it is recommended that a diabetic patient have at least a yearly exam. Diabetes can damage the small blood vessels in the retina and cause visual loss through swelling or bleeding. However, this can also be a marker that improved blood sugar control is needed to better improve a patient’s long term health.

Another unique characteristic of the eye is the optic nerve. The optic nerve connects the eye to the brain. It is actually not a true nerve, but a direct extension of the brain since it is covered by the same tissue layers that encase the brain. Upon examination, the round optic nerve can be seen as it plugs into the back of the eye. This is the only spot in the body where central nervous system tissue can be directly viewed and examined. Consequently, if a condition exists, such as a brain tumor, which is raising pressure within the skull, the optic nerve will also swell.

Eye movements are also important in detecting problems in the lower brain and brainstem. Lesions from strokes and multiple sclerosis or pressure from tumors can affect the intricate control system for coordinated eye movements located in the brainstem. This can manifest itself as true double-vision, but it may take on subtler forms that are only detectable in certain positions of gaze or with certain rapid movements.

Finally, most people are aware of glaucoma's ability to damage peripheral vision, however, strokes affecting the visual pathways in the brain will often cause defects in peripheral vision. The type of defect can often point to the location of the stroke. These defects can range from small to large and provide evidence of damage to arteries, such as the carotid or vertebral arteries.

While most people seek eye care for their eyes and vision, it should be remembered that a proper eye exam can reveal much more about the status of one's overall health. Just as it is important to visit a primary care physician to check for diabetes, high blood pressure or high cholesterol, an eye exam can also be an open window to the body.

Dr. Kevin Skelsey is an ophthalmologist at Silverstein Eye Centers. For interviews with Dr. Skelsey, please contact Mary Helber-Jamboretz at (816) 415-3777.