

GLAUCOMA – A Silent Vision Stealer

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Today when retired bank manager G C Sharma sits at home reading his newspaper, watching his grandchildren play around him, he still gets shivers as he remembers the day when everything had gone blank.

“It was a Sunday. I was reading the newspaper while waiting for my breakfast. But as I tried to make out what was on the paper, all I could see was a white blank,” he recalls.

His sons rushed him to a doctor but by the time the doctor examined him, everything was fine. Relieved that it was passing phase, Sharma continued the eye-drops that his local doctor recommended.

“I ended up going to a specialist at a stage when the vision in my left eye had deteriorated too much. Instead of relying on a generalist, I should have gone to an eye-specialist at the very first sign that there was something wrong with my eyes,” he says.

What happened to Sharma is something that afflicts over 60 million people across the world - Glaucoma. And worse, more than half of them do not even realize it until it is too late. Rightly called the Silent Vision Stealer, glaucoma creeps up on unsuspecting victims and by the time it is detected, it is often too late to save the vision.

Glaucoma affects the optic nerve which transmits the visual messages to the brain. The nutrition to the eye is supplied by a fluid and in normal eyes the pressure of this fluid remains balanced. But with age, disease, trauma or other factors, the channels carrying the fluid get blocked, increasing the pressure inside the eye. In most cases, there are no symptoms of this increased pressure. The disease works silently, damaging the outer or peripheral vision first while maintaining the central vision. By the time the problem is detected, the patient has already suffered extensive peripheral vision damage which is irreversible.

Sharma’s glaucoma was detected and he underwent surgery which helped him, but could not reverse the damage already caused. Sharma can at best see vague shadowy impressions with his left eye and relies on his right eye to see. The only good news is that because the glaucoma was detected, doctors were able to save his right eye and his case served as a wake up call for his family.

Those with a family history of glaucoma are at a higher risk to contracting the disease. When Sharma was diagnosed, his entire family underwent preventive eye-check ups.

There are three tests for the early signs of glaucoma. These are a visual acuity test to see how far you can see, a visual field test to check your peripheral vision and the third test is with a tonometer which checks the pressure of the eyes.

In addition to these there are advanced tests available like the nerve fibre layer analysis (RNFL) which is done with the help of OCT and can detect glaucoma at a stage before the visual field changes have occurred, hence helping in treatment.

Regular eye check-ups can help catch glaucoma at a very early stage, reducing the changes of vision loss. So, everyone who is in the high risk group should get themselves tested.

People with a family history are at highest risk and should get an annual test done, irrespective of their age. Others who fall in this category are diabetics, hypertension patients, thyroid patients and those with a high plus or minus power.

Remember, the only way to stop glaucoma is early detection. So add a preventive eye examination to your list of annual check-ups.

Symptoms of Glaucoma:

Glaucoma in early stages generally does not show any noticeable symptoms. Chronic Glaucoma progresses too slowly to get noticed.

Some common symptoms of **Chronic Glaucoma** could be:

- Inability to adjust the eyes to darkened rooms such as theaters
- Frequent changes in eyeglass prescription
- Gradual loss of peripheral vision
- Blurred vision
- Headaches
- Poor night vision

In case of **Acute Glaucoma** resulting from rapid increase in the intraocular pressure, there could be severe symptoms. These include:

- Feeling of a blind area in the eye
- Seeing rainbow coloured halos around lights
- Severe eye pain, facial pain
- Red eye
- Cloudy vision with halos around light
- Nausea and vomiting.

The high risk groups who can get Glaucoma:

- Family history of glaucoma
- History of diabetes
- People having high minus or plus numbered glasses
- Age above forty years
- People suffering from hypertension
- Any body who has undergone any kind of eye surgery
- People with thyroid gland related ailments
- People with over-mature cataracts
- People with an injury to the eye
- People with a history of prolonged use of steroid eye drops

Must remember facts about Glaucoma:

- There is no prevention of the development of glaucoma
- Sometimes the symptoms of glaucoma are simply not noticeable
- Timely detection of glaucoma is a must
- Timely treatment of glaucoma may prevent further loss of vision and blindness

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