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**Nicole
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**IS
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Understanding vision loss

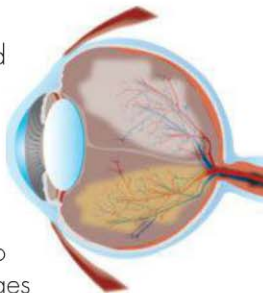
By Kathleen Furore

It might happen during dinner at a favorite restaurant, when the menu suddenly becomes tricky to decipher. Or perhaps you pick up the newspaper one day and realize that the blurry copy is almost impossible to read. A change in vision, especially one that seems to happen overnight, can be jarring. But you have lots of options that can help you see clearly once again.

How your eye works

Normally, light comes into your eye from the cornea and then travels through the pupil and the lens, onto the retina and then off to the brain through your optic nerve, explains ophthalmologist Dr. Chris Albanis, president of the Illinois Association of Ophthalmology and a clinical associate at the University of Chicago. "All of those anatomical structures need to function well for our vision to be clear, but common transitions through life cause changes to these structures, and thus vision change or loss," she says.

Presbyopia, myopia (nearsightedness), hyperopia (farsightedness) and cataracts are the most common eye problems that result from physiological changes.



PRESBYOPIA: Presbyopia (literally translated as "old eye") occurs when the crystalline lens of the eye loses its flexibility, usually beginning after age 40. Because the lens can no longer change shape, it becomes hard to focus on close objects. That's when the most common symptoms—a tendency to hold reading materials at arm's length, blurred vision at normal reading distance, eye fatigue and headaches when doing close work—set in, according to the American Optometric Association.

NEAR- AND FARSIGHTEDNESS: More than 50 percent of Americans need glasses or contact lenses to see either far or near. Myopia (nearsightedness), which affects nearly 30 percent of the U.S. population, occurs if the eyeball is too long or the cornea (the eye's clear front cover) has too much curvature. As a result, light doesn't focus correctly when entering the eye, making distant objects look blurred.

"There are several genetic and environmental factors associated with myopia," Dr. Albanis notes. She stresses that genetic factors are the main cause, but "while they're controversial, some studies suggest that significant use of our eyes for near tasks—reading and computer work, for example—increases the risk of developing myopia," she adds.

Hyperopia (farsightedness), on the other hand, results from an eyeball that is too short, or a cornea with too little curvature. The eyes cannot focus on close objects but can see distant ones clearly.

CATARACTS: Cataracts are cloudy or opaque areas in the lens that cause blurred vision, reduced intensity of colors, greater sensitivity to glare (particularly when driving at night) and increased problems with night vision. They develop due to changes in the proteins and fibers that make up the lens, usually in people 55 and older.

Seeing straight

The good news is that there are simple and effective ways to combat the onslaught of normal vision changes as you grow older.

"The most common treatment for presbyopia is reading glasses, or bifocals for those who already wear glasses," says Dr. Albanis. Reading glasses can be either over the counter or prescription, and there is an array of progressive lenses designed to correct presbyopia, including bifocal and trifocal glasses (with and without lines), bifocal contact lenses, and monovision contact lenses (a lens for distance vision worn in your dominant eye, and a lens for near vision worn in your non-dominant eye).

If you suffer from cataracts, your eye doctor may recommend changing your eyeglass prescription, increasing reading light, and using anti-glare coatings on clear lenses to reduce glare for night driving. Surgery, which involves replacing the affected lens with an artificial one that significantly improves vision, is an option when cataracts impact your ability to perform everyday tasks.

Laser vision correction surgery, which can permanently change the shape of the cornea, is also a possibility for correcting near- and farsightedness. "If the health of your eyes is normal aside from myopia and hyperopia, you may be a candidate for laser vision correction," says Dr. Albanis.

But because it impacts the cornea rather than the lens of the eye, standard laser vision correction surgery doesn't improve presbyopia. For some people, however, corrective surgery in the non-dominant eye to improve near vision can

achieve the same effect as monovision contact lenses for presbyopia. •

4 WAYS TO PROTECT YOUR VISION

1. Get regular eye check-ups and keep your eyeglass prescription updated.
2. Your mother was right—turn up the lights for reading and other close-up activities.
3. Eat a healthy diet and keep chronic conditions such as diabetes (which can affect vision) under control.
4. Contact your doctor right away if you suddenly have blurred vision or lose vision in one eye, see black spots, or see light flashes or halos around lights.