

TESTING THE NATION'S EYE Q

How smart are we when it comes to looking
after our vision and eye health?



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**NATIONAL EYE
HEALTH WEEK**
MONDAY 19 – SUNDAY 25 SEPTEMBER 2022
YOUR VISION MATTERS

This report has been produced by Eye Health UK (registered charity number:1086146) in association with Thomas Pocklington Trust (registered charity number: 1113729).

Eye Health UK was originally established 70 years ago to support the launch of NHS optical services. It was awarded charity status in 2002 and is the only charity in the UK dedicated all aspects of eye care. Its activities comprise public health campaigns, including National Eye Health Week, provision of health promotion literature, digital health advice and a public information line.

Find out more at: www.visionmatters.org.uk

Thomas Pocklington Trust is a national charity dedicated to enabling and empowering blind and partially sighted people of all ages to live the life they want to lead. With a core focus on education, employment and engagement, it is committed to increasing awareness and understanding of the needs and aspirations of visually impaired people, to working with partners and developing and implementing services which meet these needs to increase independence and improve lives.

Find out more at: www.pocklington-trust.org.uk

The findings are based on the results of a survey conducted by .Yonder Consulting in accordance with MRS guidelines and regulations, on a representative sample of 2,077 UK Adults aged 18+ between 24 – 25 August 2022. All figures quoted are from this study unless otherwise stated.

Where we reference 'people living with sight loss' or 'people living with some form of sight loss' these are the views of people who self-certified they have sight loss that is not caused by long/short-sightedness or needing reading glasses. Or, have certified they have an eye-condition such as cataracts, glaucoma, an inherited eye condition or macular degeneration that involves on-going management/treatment or that could lead to permanent sight loss. Short-term eye conditions that can be cured or easily corrected or conditions such as colour blindness were also excluded.

INTRODUCTION

One in three of us will suffer sight loss in our lifetime, yet half of this could be avoided.¹

Routine eye tests – to ensure early detection and treatment of eye conditions – and adopting healthy lifestyles are key to preventing unnecessary sight loss; however, as this report reveals, millions of us risk vision impairment simply because we lack ‘know-how’ when it comes to caring for our eyes.

Even minor sight loss can have a huge impact on our lives, affecting our mental health and physical wellbeing.

People aged 50 plus with visual acuity $<6/12$ have a two-fold increased risk of death, falls and difficulty with daily living, as well as, a three-fold increased risk of depression.²

Near-normal vision, where you may not have recognised your eyesight is impaired, can also take a significant toll on quality of life.

It's crucial then that we take good care of our eyes.

So, to mark National Eye Health Week (19–25 September 2022) Eye Health UK and Thomas Pocklington Trust put the nation's ‘Eye Q’ to the test to understand how ‘smart’ we are when it comes looking after our vision and eye health.

Sadly, the results of our research identify some gaping holes in the public's knowledge about eye care and reinforces the need for greater awareness of the factors associated with poor eye health and the simple steps we can take to reduce the risk of future sight loss.

Better public education on prevention measures and ‘red flags’ for serious eye complaints will help reduce the social and economic burden of sight loss; alleviate strains placed on the health service and help us live well for longer.

Read on to find out more about the nation's Eye Q and possible strategies for reducing the risk of avoidable sight loss.



SNAPSHOT OF THE UK'S EYE HEALTH

To help us get a picture of the current state of the nation's eye health we asked people to rate the quality of their vision on a five-point scale ranging from 'Excellent' to 'Very Poor'. Most (47%) rated their vision as 'Fair'.

Those rating their vision at the lower end of the scale tended to be middle-aged (see fig 1.); from lower socio-economic groups or from ethnic minorities.

People from ethnic minority communities were around twice as likely to rate their vision as Poor/Very Poor (14%) compared to White British (7%); whilst around one in 10 with an annual household income <£14K rated their eye health as Poor/Very Poor compared to one in 50 with a household income >£83K.

Seventy-seven per cent of those questioned say they've suffered poor eye health – eye irritation, visual disturbance (eg flashes and floaters); blurred vision* or sensitivity to light – in the last 12 months.

This figure rises to a staggering 96 per cent for people already living with some form of sight loss.

Many also confided that they are concerned about future sight loss. Two thirds of us say we are worried about our long-term vision; with women more likely to be fearful (64%) than men (57%).

People living with some form of sight loss also had a greater propensity to worry about their long-term vision (76%).

** except when not wearing prescribed eyewear.*

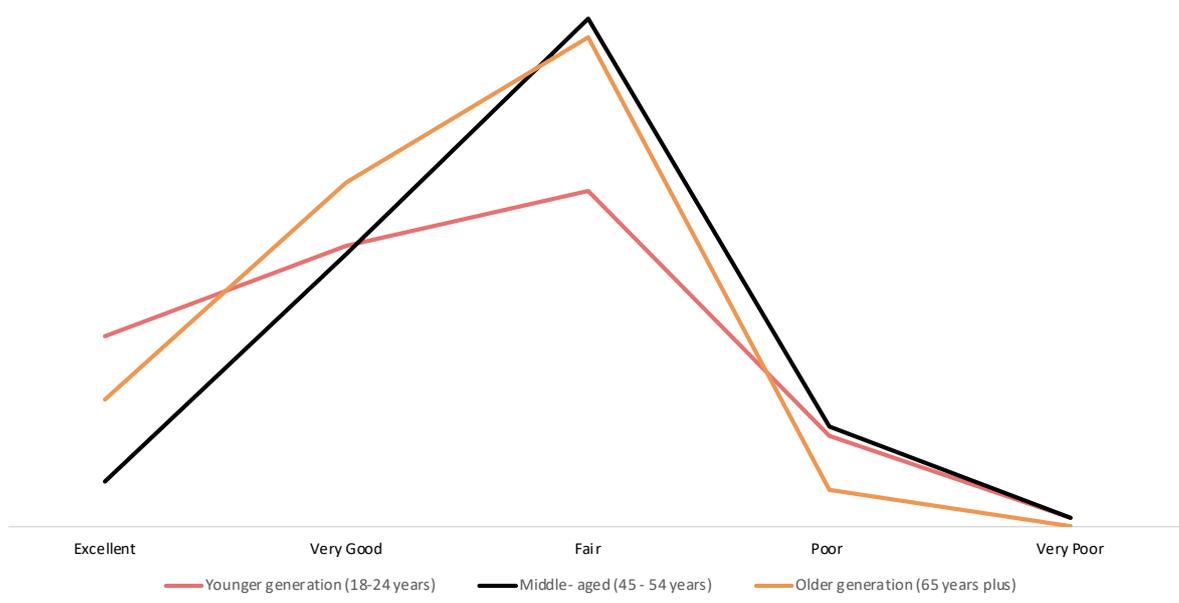


fig 1. Self-rated quality of vision by generation

DAILY CHALLENGES

More than half of those questioned (52%) said that their daily lives have been disrupted by the quality of their vision – affecting their ability to do, or enjoy, day-to-day activities including household chores, driving, reading or hobbies.

Reading small print on food packaging, medicines and instructions was a daily challenge for 28 per cent of us. This number rose to 44 per cent for people living with some form of sight loss.

Eighteen per cent of us also said our eyesight made reading books, magazines or menus a struggle.

It's no surprise then that half of us (48%) have resorted to using our mobile phones to zoom in on something to get a better look - giving a whole new meaning to the term 'eye phone'!

Driving was another key area affected by the quality of our vision. One in six UK Adults aged 18-30 say they have had trouble reading road signs.

According to Ofcom's 'media nation' report we spent an average of five hours and 16 minutes watching TV and video content in 2021, however, one in 6 of us say the quality of our vision affected our enjoyment when watching the telly.

A quarter (27%) of people living with sight loss said the level of their vision had compromised their TV viewing. When asked about use of TV audio description though only seven per cent had used it.

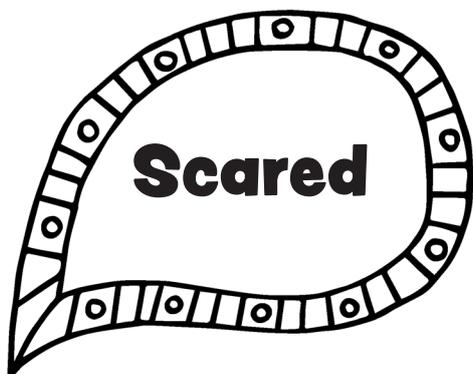
One in ten people living with sight loss also said their sight had affected their ability to do, or enjoy, their job.



EMOTIONAL EYES

We also found eye health often affects our emotions and mental well-being. More than half of us (55%) say our vision has affected our emotional state.

Common feelings triggered by our visual ability include: frustration (24%), anxiety (16%) and stress 13%.



Scared was one word that cropped up again and again to describe how the quality of our vision had made us feel

Women had a higher propensity to feel anxious than men (19% vs 14%).

Younger generations were also more likely to suffer feelings of anxiety relating to their eye health.

One in five people aged 18–24 said their vision had left them feeling anxious compared to just 13 per cent of people aged 65 and over.

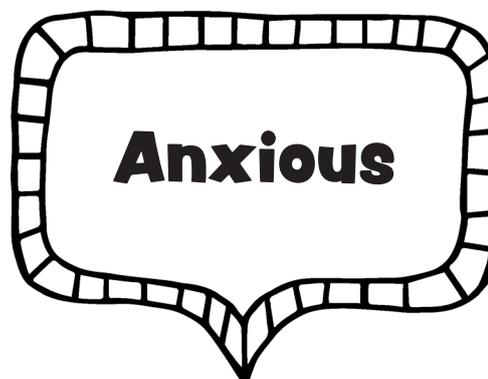
Almost one in four people from an ethnic minority said their vision had made them feel anxious compared to one in seven who describe themselves as White British.



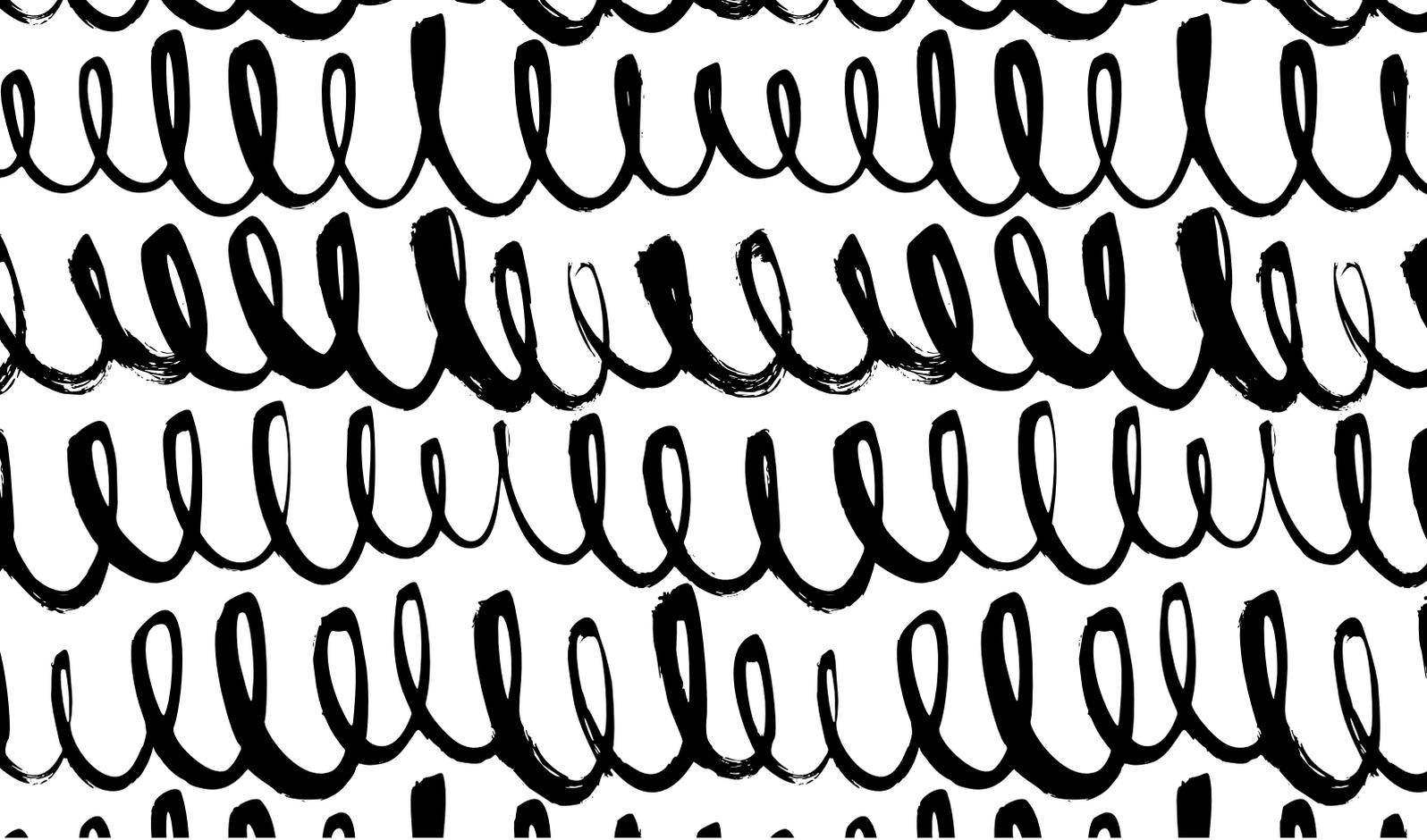
The effect of eye health on a person's mental state was particularly prevalent amongst people living with sight loss with more than three quarters (76%) saying their mental health had been affected.

Frustration was cited by more than a third (36%), anxiety by 32 per cent and stress by 19 per cent.

Other words people living with sight loss used to describe how their vision had made them feel included fatigued (31%), distracted (8%), excluded (7%) and lonely (4%).



One in seven of us (16%) say the quality of our vision has left us feeling anxious.



TESTING THE NATION'S EYE Q

With so many aspects of people's lives being affected by the quality of their vision and eye health, we wanted to understand why this is happening.

Where are the gaps in our knowledge when it comes to looking after our eyes?

So, we asked people about their knowledge, understanding and behaviours relating to:

- **Routine eye tests**
- **The range of services offered at high street optical practices**
- **Red flags for poor eye health**
- **Lifestyle habits**
- **Our general health and that of our family**

ESSENTIAL HEALTH CHECK

Routine eye tests are essential health checks.

Not only can an eye test check your visual acuity they can detect eye conditions such as glaucoma years before you notice a change in your vision. They can even uncover signs of general health problems including diabetes, high blood pressure and early signs of heart disease.

If your optometrist spots signs of general health conditions they can refer you to appropriate healthcare professionals or services ensuring timely treatment and a reduced risk of severe health problems.

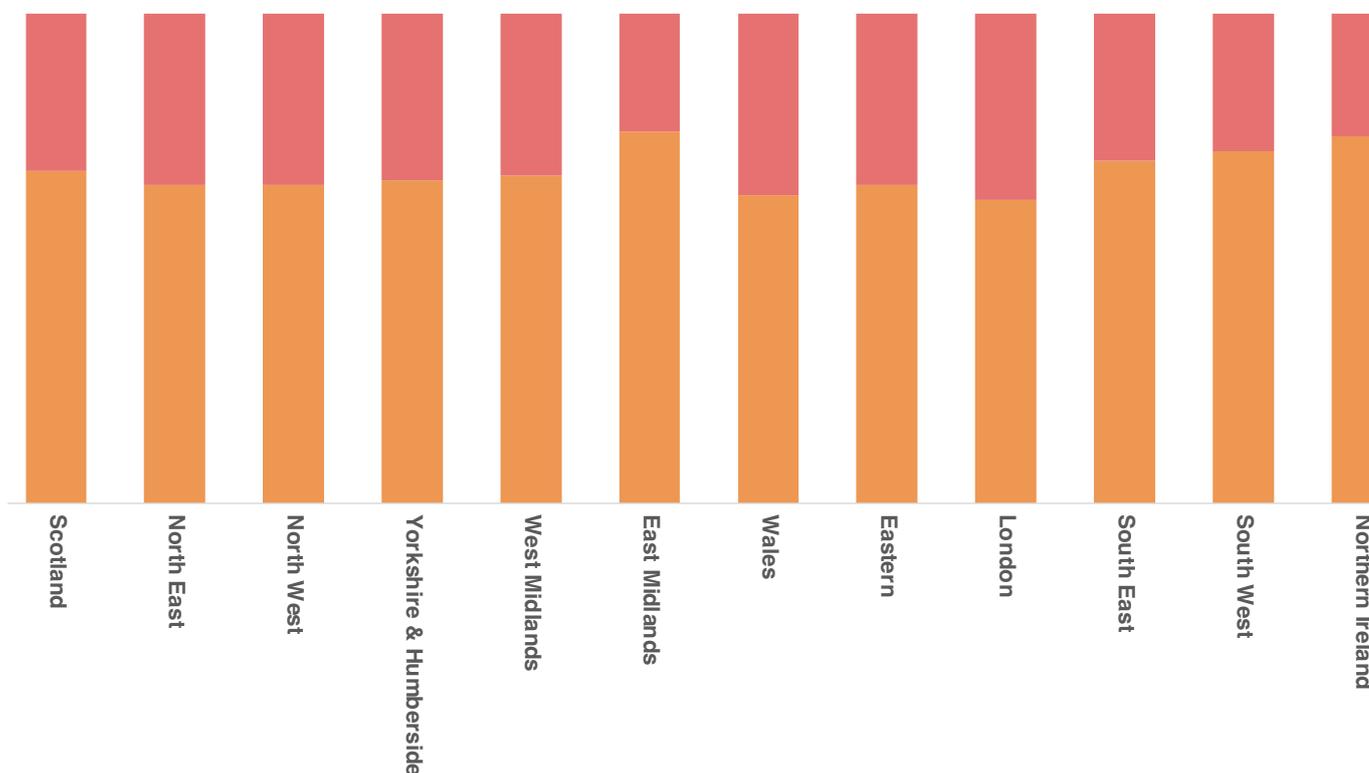
Only one in four of those questioned rated routine eye tests as important for maintaining good eye health.

Worryingly, the results of our survey also reveal more than 17.5 million of us haven't had an eye test in the last two years, as recommended,³ with men (49%) and minority ethnic groups (45%) most likely to skip this essential health check.

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly played its part in people not having had a recent eye test, however this wasn't cited a key reason for having missed out on an eye test in the last two years.

fig 2. Uptake of eye tests by region

Have had a recent eye test Have NOT had a recent eye test



Fears about the cost of eye care was the number one reason given for not having had an eye test in the last two years (36%), followed by the misnomer that 'my eyes are fine, so I don't need to go for an eye test' (26%).

Women who had not had a recent eye test were more likely to be worried about cost than men who had not had a recent check (44% Vs 30%).

The odds that a man would skip a check because they think their eyes are fine are 1.26 greater than for a woman.

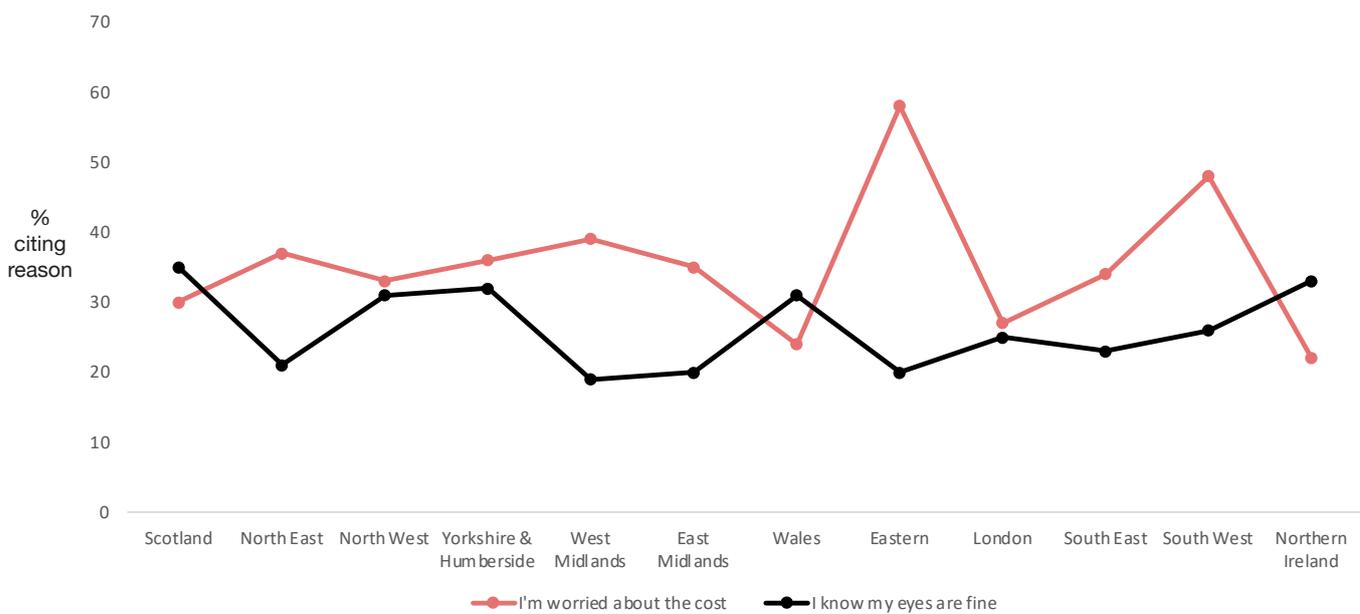
Whilst the odds that someone from an ethnic minority group would miss getting an eye test 'because their eyes are fine' was 1.3 more likely than the UK Average.

Those in the lowest income bracket (<£7K) were twice as likely to skip an eye test because of perceived cost Vs someone living in a household with an annual income >£83K.

However, those with higher incomes, are more likely to wrongly believe you don't need an eye test if your eyes 'seem' fine. (>£83K 42% Vs <£7K 24%).

Concerns about the cost of eye care was also a major barrier for poor uptake amongst people with some form of sight loss (29%), however, there was also a common misconception that hospital eye consultants were already monitoring general eye health and that routine eye tests were not required in addition to hospital appointments (18%).

fig 3. Key reasons for not having had an eye test in the last two years by region



EXPERT CARE & ADVICE

Knowledge about NHS eye care support and services was inconsistent.

With cost being a barrier to uptake of routine sight tests it's crucial that those who qualify for eye care paid for by the NHS are aware of their entitlement.

Unfortunately, one in ten over 65s aren't aware they are entitled to NHS sight tests, despite them being free (paid for by the NHS) for over 60s since April 1999.

Scotland extended a free sight test service to its entire population in 2006, yet a quarter of Scots (26%) don't know about this entitlement.

Almost 8 in 10 (79%) people living in the lowest income households (<£7K) aren't aware that they may be entitled to NHS help with the cost of any eyewear prescribed.

There was also low awareness of the enhanced optical services available at many high street opticians.

Three quarters of England is covered by an NHS Urgent Eye Care Service and people in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are covered by NI PEARS and extended eye care services for the assessment, treatment and referral of sudden eye problems

Awareness of these services was greatest in Northern Ireland (54%) and Scotland (47%) with awareness across England & Wales as follows:

- East Midlands** 39%
- North West** 38%
- West Midlands** 38%
- Wales** 38%
- Eastern** 36%
- North East England** 34%
- Yorkshire & Humberside** 34%
- London** 31%
- South East** 31%
- South West** 31%

Just a third (35%) of us are aware that many optical practices offer free NHS appointments for minor eye conditions.

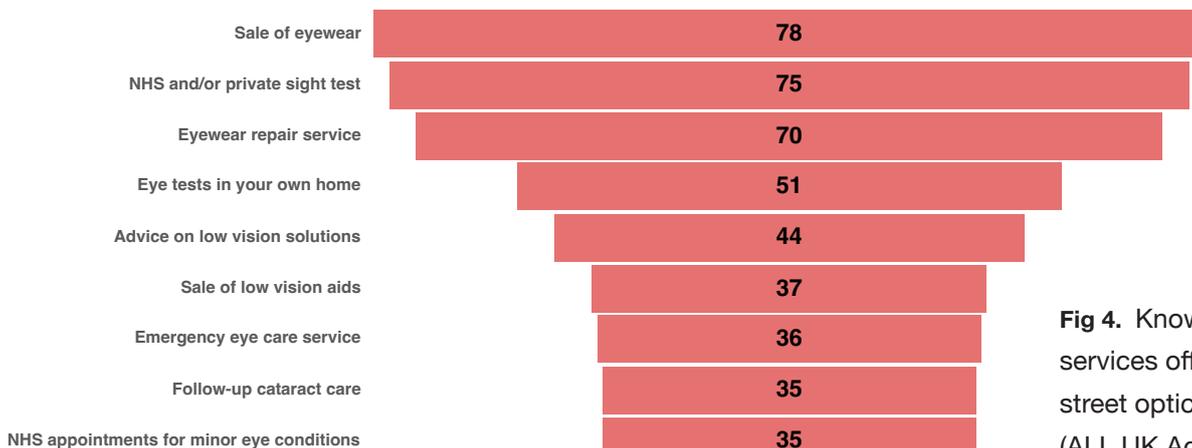


Fig 4. Knowledge about services offered at high street optical practices (ALL UK Adults & Regions)

RECOGNISING RED FLAGS

We found a worrying lack of awareness of ‘red flag’ symptoms linked to sight-threatening eye conditions such as uveitis, corneal abrasion, viral keratitis and acute angle closure glaucoma.

Symptoms including ...

- A curtain, veil or shadow in your vision
- Sudden sight loss or double vision
- Acute redness in one or both eyes
- Sensitivity to light photophobia
- Severe eye pain
- Suddenly seeing lots of flashes or floaters (little dots or squiggles)

... require urgent, often same day, treatment to prevent or arrest vision impairment.

Despite being symptoms of retinal detachment – a condition requiring timely treatment to avoid permanent sight loss – just one in five of us (19%) would seek medical attention if we suddenly saw lots of flashes and floaters in our vision, and fewer than half of us (48%) would take urgent action if we saw a shadow, veil or curtain over our vision.

Acute redness is another warning sign of a possible eye emergency, especially if accompanied by eye pain or reduced visual acuity. However, only around a quarter of us (27%) would seek same day medical attention if we suddenly experienced acute redness in one or both eyes.

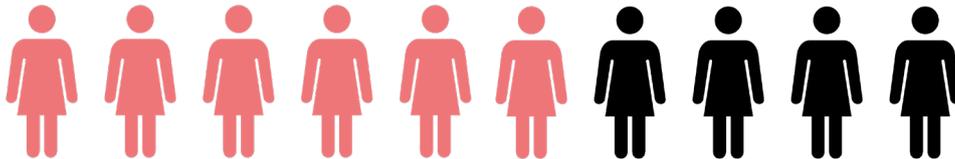
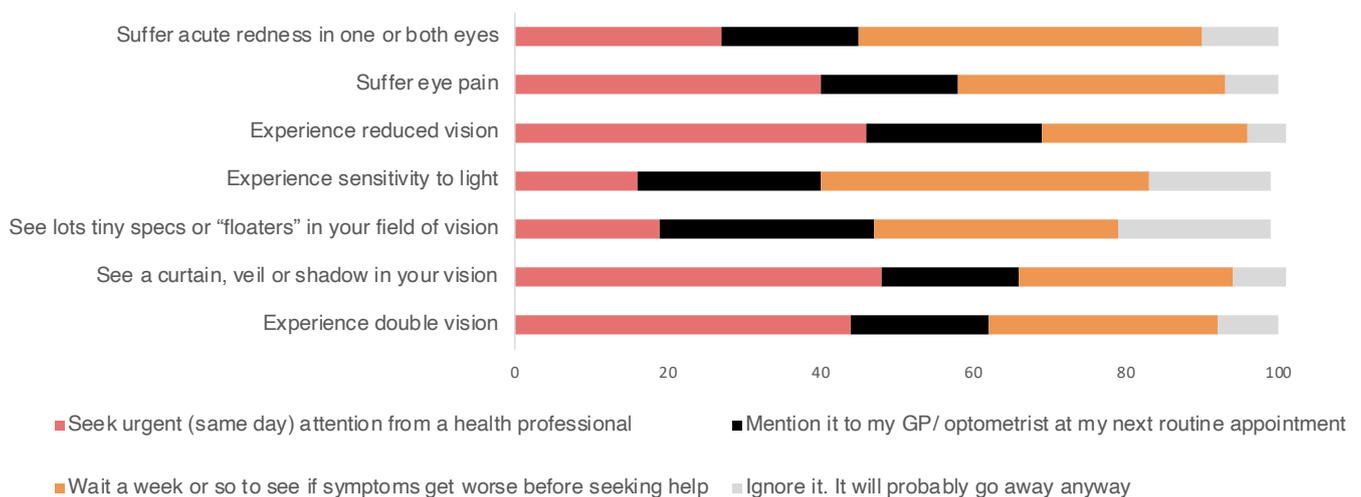


fig 5.

Six in 10 of us would **NOT** seek urgent advice from a healthcare professional if we experienced eye pain.

fig 6. What would you do if you experienced the following symptoms (All UK Adults).



LIFESTYLE MATTERS

Understanding what factors increase your risk of future sight loss is an important first step towards improving the state of the nation's eye health.

Risk factors are varied and include: ethnicity, age, sex, your health status and your family's medical history. Lifestyle behaviours such as smoking, poor diet and being physically inactive can also increase the risk of vision loss.

Fig 7. below illustrates poor public knowledge of some of the key factors contributing to poor eye health or reduced vision.

People living with sight loss were less likely to understand that there is a correlation between eye health and factors such as the

menopause, uptake of sight tests, general health and the health of close relatives.

Eye Fit

A meagre eight per cent of UK Adults linked exercise and eye health despite evidence showing that physical activity can significantly reduce the risk of visual impairment – being physically active can reduce your risk of visual impairment by 58 per cent versus somebody with a sedentary lifestyle.⁴

Eat Right for Good Sight

Eighty per cent of us are in the dark about the eye health benefits of eating a nutritionally balanced diet.

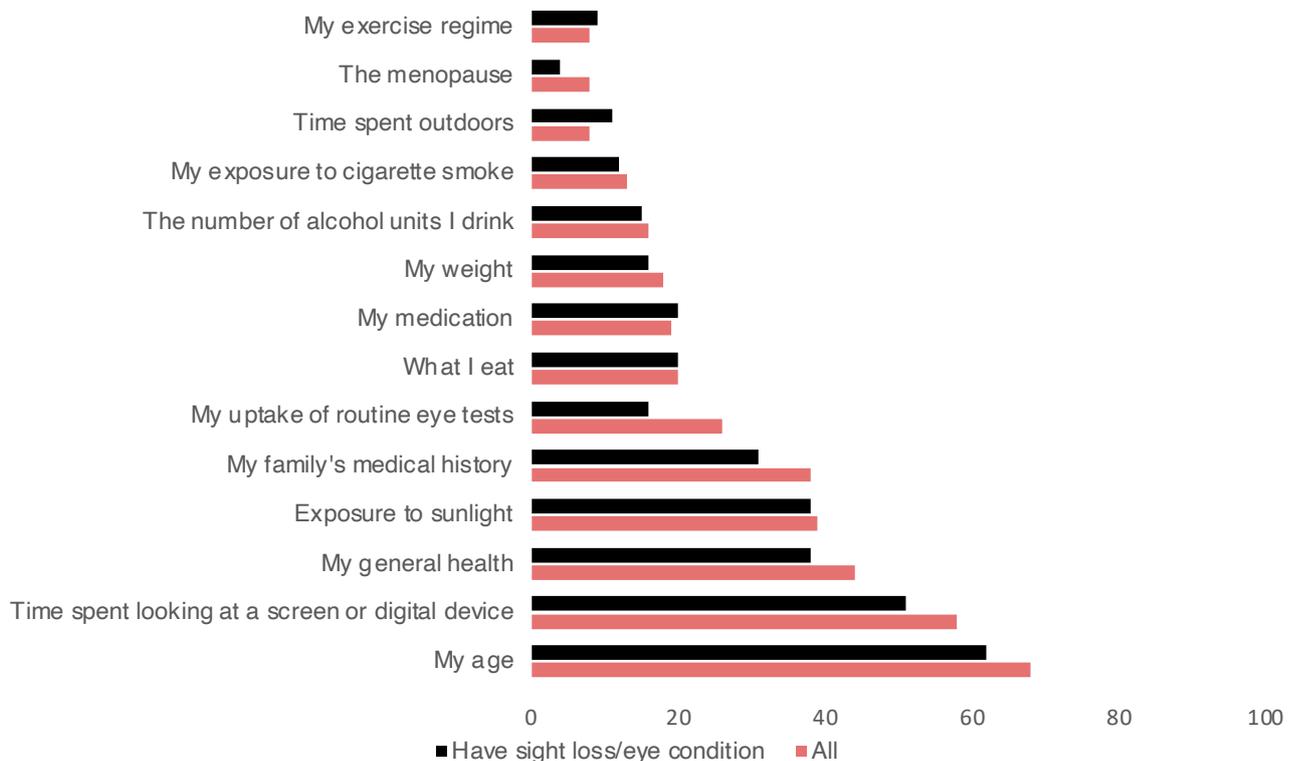


fig 7. Percentage of people identifying common risk factors for poor eye health or future sight loss

Protecting your eyes starts with the food you eat. Eye-friendly nutrients found in many fruits and vegetables as well as fatty acids derived from fish, nuts and oils can all help protect your sight.

Our research found just one in five of us are eating an eye-friendly diet with five or more portions of fruit and veg a day, fish twice a week and plenty of wholegrains.

Harmful Rays

Worryingly only four in 10 (38%) understood the dangers posed by exposure to the sun's UV rays.

Cumulative UV exposure can increase your risk of developing cataracts and macular degeneration as well as a host of other short- and long-term eye conditions.

Vanity over Vision

When choosing sunglasses it's essential to ensure they are safe as well as stylish. However, four in ten of us (39%) don't check that sunglasses provide adequate UV protection before buying them and 30 per cent of us disagree with the statement "I wear sunglasses to prevent UV damage, not just as a fashion accessory."

Twenty-three per cent of us also think that UV protection is only necessary in Spring and Summer months when in fact eyes need protecting whenever the UV index rises to three or more. Even on a cloudy day.^{5,6}

Blind to the Risks of Smoking

Just 13 per cent link smoking and sight loss, even though smoking is a direct cause of sight loss, including macular degeneration – the UK's leading cause of blindness.

Research published in the British Medical Journal reveals as many as one in five cases of Age-related Macular Degeneration (AMD) are caused by tobacco consumption.⁷

A Weighty Issue

Fewer than one in five of us (18%) realise that our weight can affect eye health.

Obesity is a risk factor for all four major causes of sight loss: macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma and cataracts so maintaining a happy weight is crucial in order to prevent avoidable sight loss.

Eye Health & The Menopause

Only 13 per cent of peri- and menopausal women* made the connection between fluctuating hormones during the menopause and eye health, despite 'the change' triggering conditions such as dry eye and blepharitis, and increasing the risk of glaucoma and cataracts.

Screen Smart

With increasing screen use more and more of us are suffering screen fatigue – headaches, sore or tired eyes and temporary blurring of our vision – because we don't know how to be screen smart.

Only one in seven of us follow the 20-20-20 rule [look away from your screen every 20 minutes and focus on something 20 feet away for 20 seconds]; just 28 per cent adjust room lighting and four in five don't consciously blink when looking at screens.

* Women aged 45 - 54 years of age.



GENETICS & GENERAL HEALTH

Your family's medical history can influence the health of your eyes. Yet, fewer than half of us realise that a relative's eye health could influence our own risk of eye disease.

Tellingly the awareness of genetic risk was lower (31%) amongst people living with some form of sight loss, compared to the UK Average (38%).

There is a four-times higher risk of developing glaucoma if you have a close blood relative who has it.⁸

Only a third (32%) of people we surveyed who have a close relative with glaucoma think that they themselves are at risk of the condition.

This rises to only one in six for people aged 18 -24 years who have a close relative with glaucoma.

Genetic factors also significantly contribute to the onset and progression of short-sightedness (myopia).

Epidemiology studies suggest that the risk of myopia is doubled if children has one myopic parent, and 3-5 times if they had two.⁹

High myopia increases the risk of serious disorders such as myopic macular degeneration, retinal detachment, glaucoma, and cataract.

Only one in eight people who have a close relative with myopia think this could put them at risk of the condition.

Living with certain health conditions can also increase your risk of poor health and exacerbate existing vision impairment.

Awareness that general health conditions can affect your eye health or risk of sight loss was low.

	All Adults %	People living with some form of sight loss %
Diabetes	70	61
Hypertension (high blood pressure)	54	51
Stroke	46	46
Cardiovascular Disease	30	27
Multiple Sclerosis	24	20
Parkinson's Disease	19	17
Alzheimers'	16	17
Learning Disability	7	7

fig 8. % of people who are aware that individual conditions can impact eye health.

People with learning disabilities are at a greatly increased risk of sight problems at any age. Adults with learning disabilities are 10 times more likely to have serious sight problems than other adults and children are 28 times more likely.¹⁰

Untreated high blood pressure can affect your eyesight and lead to eye disease. It can cause damage to the blood vessels in the retina, the area at the back of the eye where images focus. Over time, high blood pressure can lead to glaucoma.

EYE CARE MYTHS

The Eye Q survey uncovered some popular misconceptions about vision and eye health, including:

75% of us think it's okay to shower in contact lenses. It's not. Contacts should be removed before showering to prevent water-borne infection.

72% of us are unaware of the dangers of using old mascara. Using mascara that's been open for more than three or four months is a common cause of eye irritation and infection.

65% of us think reading in dim light could damage our eyes. It won't. It will simply highlight any existing imperfection. If you struggle to read, book a sight test at your local opticians.

56% of us are unaware that rubbing our eyes could be harmful. However, excessive rubbing is linked to keratoconus – a condition that distorts your vision.

47% of us think it's okay to use eye drops past their listed expiry date. Don't. This can lead to irritation, inflammation, and even an eye infection. Always dispose of out-of-date medications safely.



Five Ways to Boost Your Eye Q

Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) estimates the number of people in the UK with sight loss will double by 2050.

Learning how to look after our eyes is essential to prevent avoidable sight loss and reduce the number of us experiencing poor eye health. Here are five key ways we can all give our Eye Q a boost.

Learn about eye tests. What they entail, when you should have them and why they are essential for your eye health and general wellbeing.

Understand how your family's medical history could affect your own eye health and risk of future sight loss. Conditions such as myopia (short-sightedness) and glaucoma have strong genetic links.

Be aware of red flag symptoms associated with sight-threatening eye conditions. Conditions like retinal detachment need urgent, often same-day, treatment to prevent or arrest vision impairment.

Appreciate how your lifestyle could be putting you at risk of future sight loss. Consider your diet, exercise regime, smoking status, drinking habits and the amount of time spent outdoors. These can all impact your vision and eye health.

Be screen smart. Prevent screen fatigue by following the 20-20-20 rule [look up from your screen every 20 minutes and focus on an object 20 feet away for 20 seconds].



Final Thoughts & Acknowledgements

Reassuringly, 85 per cent of us say we'd make lifestyle changes if we knew our current habits were putting us at increased risk of future sight loss.

It's crucial then that we leverage this willingness to make lifestyle changes for the benefit of our eye and general health.

We'll be using the Eye Q test results to help shape future public eye health promotions.

If you'd like to join us in giving the nation's Eye Q a boost please get in touch, we'd love to hear from you.

info@visionmatters.org.uk

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Acknowledgements

1. Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)
2. Adapted from <http://cera.unimelb.edu.au/publications/reports/eyecareforcommunity.pdf>
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Published September 2022 by Eye Health UK (registered charity no 1086146)
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