



Glaucoma: What You Need to Know

What is glaucoma?

- Glaucoma is a group of eye diseases that can cause vision loss and blindness by damaging a nerve in the back of your eye called the optic nerve.
- The symptoms can start so slowly that you may not notice them. The only way to find out if you have glaucoma is to get a dilated eye exam.
- There's no cure for glaucoma, but early treatment can often slow down or stop the damage and protect your vision.

What are the types of glaucoma?

There are many different types of glaucoma, but the most common type in the United States is called **open-angle glaucoma** — that's what most people mean when they talk about glaucoma. Another common type is angle-closure glaucoma. There are other types, but they tend to be more rare.



Glaucoma at a glance:

- **Early Symptoms:**
Often none
- **Later Symptoms:**
Loss of side (peripheral) vision, blind spots, blindness
- **Diagnosis:**
Dilated eye exam with eye pressure and visual field testing to test your side vision
- **Treatment:**
Medicine (usually eye drops), laser treatment, surgery

What are the symptoms of glaucoma?

At first, glaucoma doesn't usually have any symptoms. That's why half of people with glaucoma don't even know they have it.

Over time, you may slowly lose vision, usually starting with your side (peripheral) vision — especially the part of your vision that's closest to your nose. You may also lose some of your contrast sensitivity. This can make colors look more washed out or like you are looking through a fog. Because it happens so slowly, many people can't tell that their vision is changing at first. Glaucoma can happen in 1 eye or both eyes.

As the disease gets worse, you may start to notice that you can't see things off to the side anymore, or you may notice blurred spots. Without treatment, glaucoma can eventually cause total blindness.



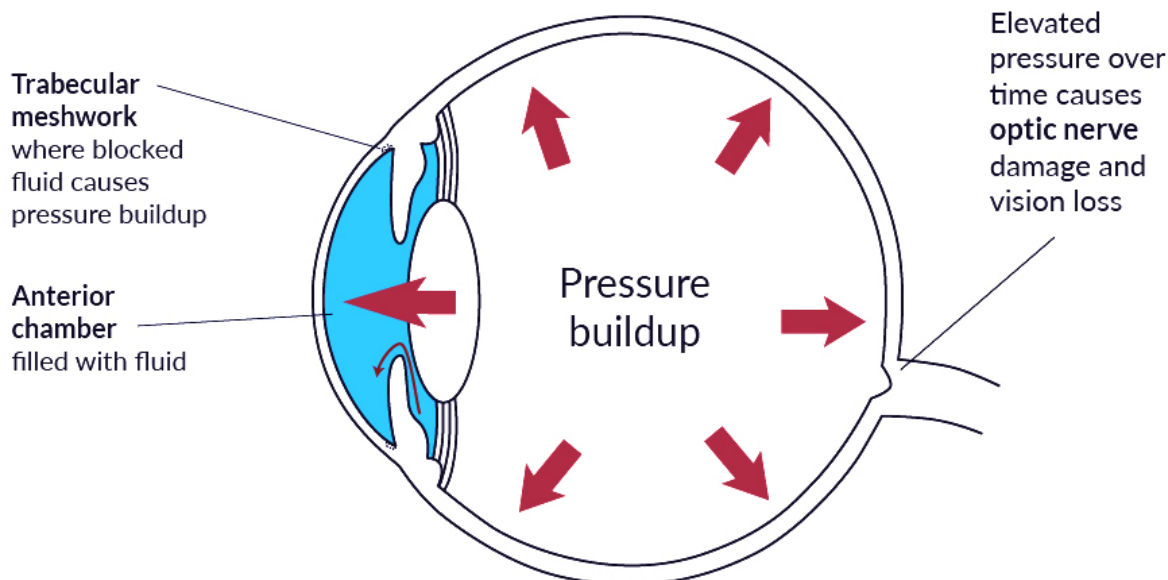
When to get help right away

Angle-closure glaucoma can cause sudden intense eye pain, red eye, blurry vision, and upset stomach (nausea).

If you have any of these symptoms, go to your doctor or an emergency room right away.

What causes glaucoma?

There isn't one specific cause of glaucoma. Current treatments for glaucoma all work by lowering eye pressure. Experts know that when the pressure inside your eye gets too high, it can damage the optic nerve and cause vision loss. Treatments that lower eye pressure help to slow the disease.



Who is at risk for glaucoma?

Anyone can get glaucoma, but some people are at higher risk. You may be at higher risk if you:

- Are over age 60
- Are African American and over age 40
- Are Asian American
- Are Hispanic/Latino
- Have a family history of glaucoma

People who are more likely to get glaucoma need to get a comprehensive dilated eye exam every 1 to 2 years.

How does my doctor diagnose glaucoma?

Eye doctors can check for glaucoma as part of a comprehensive dilated eye exam. The exam is simple and painless — your doctor will give you some eye drops to dilate (widen) your pupil and then check your eyes for glaucoma and other eye problems. The exam includes an eye pressure test and a visual field test to check your side vision.

Normal eye pressure varies by person — what's normal for 1 person could be too high for another.

What's the treatment for glaucoma?

Doctors use different types of treatment for glaucoma, including medicines (usually eye drops), laser treatment, and surgery.

If you have glaucoma, it's important to start treatment right away. Treatment won't undo any damage to your vision, but it can stop it from getting worse.



Medicines

Prescription eye drops are the most common treatment. They lower the pressure in your eye to help prevent further damage to your optic nerve.



Laser treatment

To lower your eye pressure, doctors can use lasers to help the fluid drain out of your eye. It's a simple procedure that your doctor can do in the office for open-angle glaucoma. Doctors can also use a laser to prevent or treat angle-closure glaucoma.



Surgery

If medicines and laser treatment don't work, your doctor might suggest surgery. There are many different types of surgery that can help the fluid drain out of your eye.

Talk over your options with your doctor. While glaucoma is a serious disease, treatment works well. Remember these tips:

- If your doctor prescribes medicine, be sure to take it every day
- Tell your doctor if your treatment causes side effects
- See your doctor for regular check-ups
- If you're having trouble with everyday activities because of your vision loss, ask your doctor about vision rehabilitation services or devices that could help
- Encourage family members to get checked for glaucoma, since it can run in families

How does glaucoma affect my vision?

Glaucoma affects your vision slowly. Over time, you may lose your side (peripheral) vision or notice blurred spots. Although you may see objects that are straight ahead clearly, you may miss objects to the side. You may notice your vision starting to seem like you're looking through a tunnel. You may also have trouble with your contrast sensitivity. This can make colors look more washed out or like you are looking through a fog.

Your vision with glaucoma may look like the image below:



This is a simulation; the experience of vision loss is subjective and difficult to represent.

Questions to ask the doctor about glaucoma

Visiting the doctor can be stressful, especially when you're dealing with a new diagnosis. It helps to have questions written down ahead of time. Use these questions to get the answers you need the next time you see your doctor.

- What type of glaucoma do I have?
- How often do I need to get a checkup for my glaucoma?
- What are my treatment options?
- What will happen if I don't get treated for my glaucoma?
- How will I know if my treatment is working?
- What is my target eye pressure range that is likely to prevent further damage?
- What are the possible dangers or side effects from treatment?
- Does glaucoma put me at risk for other eye diseases?
- What can I expect for my vision — now and in the future?
- Are there any activities I should avoid?
- Are there any medications I should avoid?

Other questions for your doctor

Visit these sites for more information:

- www.nei.nih.gov/glaucoma
- www.americanglaucomasociety.net
- www.aao.org/eye-health/diseases/what-is-glaucoma