

For Immediate Release

December 7, 2006

Contact:

Media Relations

(415) 561-8534

media@aao.org

Glaucoma: Silently Stealing Sight from Millions Many Don't Know They Have the Disease Until it's Too Late

SAN FRANCISCO – As you read this sentence, you could be going blind and not know it. Silently, without symptoms, Glaucoma could be stealing your sight, and there is no cure.

January is Glaucoma Awareness Month, and the American Academy of Ophthalmology and its partner the American Glaucoma Society strongly urges everyone to get a complete eye exam, especially if you are in a high risk category, including:

- African-Americans older than 40
- Hispanics
- People with a family history of glaucoma
- Anybody older than 60
- People with adverse health conditions, such as diabetes
- Those who have experienced a serious eye injury
- Those who are severely nearsighted

The National Institutes of Health estimates that 4.2 million Americans have glaucoma, but only half know it.

The second leading cause of blindness in the world, glaucoma accounts for 12 percent of blindness in the United States. And with a rapidly aging Baby Boom generation, these numbers are expected to double in the next decade.

The best defense against glaucoma is detecting it early, said Andrew Iwach, MD, Academy spokesperson.

“Knowing you have glaucoma is one of the most important factors in treating the disease and preventing vision loss,” he said. “So many people are losing their sight and simply do not realize it. Glaucoma is a treatable disease. Vision loss can be minimized. Those who are potentially at risk must take the first step and get an eye exam.”

What is Glaucoma?

Glaucoma is a group of eye diseases that gradually damage the optic nerve, the main conduit carrying visual information from the eye to the brain. Like a video camera with a weak cable link to a television, the picture is compromised.

“Elevated pressure inside the eye damages the optic nerve,” Dr. Iwach said. “Even people with ‘normal’ levels of pressure can experience vision loss from glaucoma. It may begin with the loss

of peripheral vision and then advance to a narrow area known as 'tunnel vision.' If left untreated, it can lead to total blindness. Sadly, most people don't notice symptoms until they have already lost significant vision and, unfortunately, this loss is irreversible."

Dr. Iwach said that although glaucoma can be controlled, vision lost can never be regained. However, medication or surgery can slow or prevent further vision loss. "Glaucoma is a chronic condition that must be monitored for life," he said. "Early detection is vital to stopping the progress of the disease."

EyeCare America's Glaucoma EyeCare Program

EyeCare America, a public service foundation of the American Academy of Ophthalmology, encourages those without insurance to take advantage of its national Glaucoma EyeCare Program.

The program offers glaucoma eye exams for those at increased risk of glaucoma. To see if you, a loved one or a friend, is eligible to receive a referral for an eye exam and care, call 1-800-391-EYES (3937), 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Eligible callers receive a referral to one of EyeCare America's 7,300 volunteer ophthalmologists.

Those eligible for a referral through the glaucoma program receive a glaucoma eye exam and the initiation of treatment, if deemed necessary. Uninsured patients will receive the above care at no charge. More information on EyeCare America can be found at:

www.eyecareamerica.org

About the American Academy of Ophthalmology

The American Academy of Ophthalmology is the world's largest association of eye physicians and surgeons—Eye M.D.s—with more than 27,000 members worldwide. Eye health care is provided by the three "O's" – opticians, optometrists and ophthalmologists. It is the ophthalmologist, or Eye M.D., who can treat it all: eye diseases and injuries, and perform eye surgery. To find an Eye M.D. in your area, visit the Academy's Web site at www.aao.org.

