

Vision Health

How important are eye exams for adults with developmental disabilities?

As we age, our eyesight changes. Most of these changes are normal, age-related changes that do not present a serious threat to one's well-being. However, as we live longer, more and more people will experience a significant impairment of their vision that will hinder their ability to function independently on a daily basis. It is very important that older adults see an eye care specialist on a regular basis since many causes of vision impairment are treatable and vision loss can often be prevented.

If an adult with a developmental disability does not read or do any close work using her eyes, is an eye exam still necessary?

Yes, an eye exam will detect if the individual has an eye disease. Many treatable causes of vision loss are never apparent to someone looking from the outside, without the aid of special instruments. If left untreated, eye diseases can cause blindness or severe impairment which can interfere with an individual's safety in walking, the ability to understand what is expected of her, or the enjoyment of her surroundings.

How often should eye exams be scheduled?

Eye exams should be done every one to two years, or more often upon the instructions of the eye care specialist. Department of Mental Health and County Board service funders may also have annual requirements. For adults with developmental disabilities who may not be able to identify a change in vision and communicate this to family and staff, it is vitally important that routine eye health exams are provided on a regular basis. There is not a specific age at which someone should begin to have routine eye exams on a yearly basis; however, women over age 35 and men over 40 are at a higher risk for age-associated eye diseases.

With what type of eye care specialist should an appointment be scheduled?

Ophthalmologists - These specialists are doctors of medicine (M.D.) or osteopathy (D.O.). They are licensed to practice medicine and surgery and can prescribe glasses, contact lenses, and medications.

Optometrists - These specialists are doctors of optometry (O.D.). They are licensed to practice in select areas of vision care which varies from state to state. They can evaluate people for visual problems and prescribe glasses and contact lenses. In most states they may diagnose and treat eye diseases.

How will I know if an adult with a developmental disability might be having a problem with his vision?

1. **Ask** the person if s/he has any trouble seeing, has any pain, or other unusual symptoms. Ask if s/he can see about the same when either eye is covered.
2. **Observe** for changes in behavior and function. The following changes in behavior might indicate a change in vision: rubbing the eye; squinting; shutting or covering one eye; tilting or thrusting the head. Changes in function which might indicate a vision problem include: stumbling; hesitancy on steps or curbs; holding reading material (or other fine work) closer than usual; refusing to engage in activities which he previously enjoyed; sitting closer to the television than in the past. If these or similar symptoms are noticed, an appointment with an eye care specialist should be scheduled.
3. **Expect** changes as the person ages.

Resources

Lion's Club

314-645-3500 if you live South of Hwy 64/40; 314-205-1980 if you live North of Hwy 64/40

Saint Louis University Eye Institute

Scheduling - 314-256-3220

Optical Shop - 314-256-3207

<https://dssapp.dss.mo.gov/providerlist/sprovider.asp> to look for providers accepting Medicaid.