

Headline: Eyes are the windows to ... your health

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Having regular eye exams can help find a number of underlying conditions noted Optometrist Dr. Ward ZoBell of Hanna Vision Centre.

"It's one of the only opportunities any health care professional has to study exposed blood vessels in your body," explains Dr. Ward ZoBell.

"Those blood vessels can reveal quite a lot of information about your general health."

In April 2018, the Alberta Association of Optometrists performed a survey which found that 85 per cent of those questioned were not aware that eye exams could reveal medical issues like diabetes, high blood pressure and even some forms of cancer, but instead believed it was simply to write prescriptions for glasses or contact lenses.

"Gauging your vision is only a small part of the exam," explains Dr. ZoBell.

"For example, we check the blood vessels at the back of the eye and if we see weakening or narrowing of the arteries, it can be a signal of high blood pressure."

Doctors use special equipment to look at the structures at the back of the eye that leave clues to underlying health issues.

"Diabetes is a common condition that causes small amounts of bleeding in the retina," says Dr. ZoBell. "This is usually a first indicator of retinopathy and we see patients on a daily basis who are living with this condition, who have yet to be diagnosed with diabetes."

Additionally malignant melanoma can be detected through comprehensive eye exams as well.

"This cancer strikes in back of the eye, and patients often don't even know it is there unless the cancer is in the centre of their field of vision," explains Dr. ZoBell.

Should an eye exam reveal a problem the optometrist refers you to a specialist in the community, working closely with the family physicians and other health care providers to help manage your overall health as well as vision problems.

"Routine eye exams play a very useful role in detecting important medical issues at their earliest stages," says Dr. ZoBell.

"In addition to underlying health issues, we also detect eye diseases, such as glaucoma, cataracts and macular degeneration, long before you may start experiencing any symptoms like blurry vision or funny circles around bright lights."

Albertans age 19 to 64 should have an eye exam every two years, unless there are pre-existing eye conditions, a family history of eye disease, systemic disease affecting the eyes or contact lens wearers.

Seniors over 65 should have their eyes examined once a year.