

**Headline:** Residents reminded to have their eyes checked during Vision Health Month

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## Residents reminded to have their eyes checked during Vision Health Month

Residents are reminded to have their eyes checked as May marks Vision Health Month.

How frequent people receive an eye exam is either every year or two, according to Nobe Nijjar, clinical director of Nobe Eyecare Associates in Grande Prairie.

“People that are under the age of 19 definitely need to be seen yearly as do people over the age of 65. Other people it depends. Between 19 and 64, it can be two years, but if they have higher blood pressure or diabetes, complicated prescriptions, certain other medical diagnosis or are taking certain medications, it’s yearly,” Nijjar said.

Alberta health care provides children 18-years-old and under and seniors 65-years-old and older with one complementary complete eye exam, one partial exam and one diagnostic procedure each year.

“Any medical conditions are covered by Alberta Health. If you have diabetes and you need your eyes checked, that’s covered by Alberta Health,” Nijjar said. “If people have injuries or infections to their eyes, that’s all covered by Alberta Health with your local doctor of optometry. You do not need a referral. You can come directly to us.

You no longer have to go to the family doctor.”

Nijjar said eye exams can detect a number of underlying health conditions such as diabetes and hypertension, among many others.

“There are several cancers that can be picked up on an eye exam. There’s certain STDs that can also be picked up and blood conditions,” Nijjar said, adding cancers in the brain press on the eyes.

“When we look at a picture of the eyes, we can see that sometimes nerves are swollen and we can see bleeding in the eye often before a patient even notices. Sometimes, we see that with a patient not noticing any changes in visions at all and we pick that up on an eye exam.”

Optometrists can also detect a metastatic growth of cancers occurring in different areas of the body through an exam.

Nijjar recommends regular exercise and balanced diet to maintain good overall eye health.

“If a person has a history of macular degeneration, there are dark green leafy vegetables like spinach, broccoli, kale and collard greens which can reduce the risk,” Nijjar said, adding smoking can cause a lot of eye problems leading to the condition.

“Protecting the eyes from the sun is very important in Alberta because we have a really high altitude. Everybody should be using sunglasses when they’re outside.”

Macular degeneration occurs when the small central portion of the retina, known as the macula, deteriorates. It is the leading cause of severe, irreversible vision loss in people over age 60, according to WebMD.

A healthy eye does not have bleeding, no damage from sun exposure, and does not show signs of using many medications or recreational drugs.

“The only way to really tell is to have an examination by a doctor of optometry or an optometrist,” Nijjar said.