



HOW TO PROMOTE EYE HEALTH AWARENESS



Simple steps you can take to enhance your community's knowledge about preventive eye care.

BY MOHIT ADLAKHA, OD

Good vision is an essential aspect of our lives. Approximately 2.2 billion people experience vision impairment or blindness, and 80% of these individuals experience preventable blindness.¹ The main cause of vision impairment is uncorrected refractive error, followed by cataracts. Other causes include glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy (DR), retinal detachment, and age-related macular degeneration. Many individuals ignore early signs of eye disease, or even worse, they do not notice the signs of such conditions and fail to seek treatment in a timely manner, leading to preventable vision loss.² Simply put, if people do not know what is broken, they will not know what to fix. This leads into the main point of this article—that education plays a significant role in raising awareness about the importance of eye health.

Research has uncovered a surprising truth: There is relatively low awareness

surrounding eye health.¹ Some of the reasons behind this low awareness include the presence of barriers to eye care, such as cost of services; lack of insurance; distance from or lack of transportation to eye care centers; and poor communication.³ One study found that the major source of awareness about cataracts and DR was having a friend or relative who had experienced the same condition⁴—in other words, not an eye care or health care provider, nor a medium provided by a health care organization. This shows us that we can be doing more to promote eye health education within our communities to increase their level of awareness and knowledge about common eye conditions.

SHARING IS CARING

Multiple channels of communication are available for raising awareness about eye health within our practices and communities. Below are some examples of how to use them to our advantage.

Talk to Patients

Delivering high-quality care is not only about providing patients with treatment for a condition, but also educating them about that condition. Thus, describing the results and importance of eye examinations to patients is an essential step forward in raising awareness.

For example, I like to educate most of my patients about the signs and symptoms of a retinal detachment, whether they come in with complaints of flashes or floaters or not. Many of these patients share this information with others, potentially improving someone else's visual outcomes as well. I also make sure to describe the tests I am performing and what they mean, which helps patients understand that an eye examination is not simply a glasses check, but also an opportunity to receive preventive care. I often have patients tell me they never expected to receive all these tests and that they learned a lot during the examination. Such responses further promote awareness, as these patients often end up recommending eye examinations to their family and friends, some of whom have never had their eyes checked.

Distribute Printed Information

Providing patients with brochures or leaflets with information about common eye diseases, such as glaucoma or DR, while they wait for appointments enhances their knowledge about such conditions. Handing out information packages or sheets to patients as they leave your office would also help turn their attention to their eye health. For example, a patient experiencing dry eye

AT A GLANCE

- Roughly 2.2 billion people experience visual impairment or blindness, and 80% of these individuals experience preventable blindness.
- There are multiple channels of communication available to us for raising awareness about eye health within our practices and communities.
- Awareness can be only as good as your patients' ability to access the clinic; if they face barriers to access, then efforts to raise awareness will not enhance their eye health.

disease would benefit from an information package on the treatment and causes of dry eye.

Take Advantage of Social Media

With advances in technology, the number of ways to distribute and share information has also increased drastically. This is useful to reach many people and target specific communities.⁵ There are multiple ways this can be accomplished, and it requires you or your practice to create and maintain social media accounts on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and/or Twitter. Posting and sharing informative posts on social media also allows patients to engage more interactively with your practice. This effect can be further enhanced by partnering with other local health care centers and cross-sharing social media posts to collectively reach as many people as possible.

Give Oral Presentations

Presentations about eye care and optometric services given at local churches, community centers, schools and colleges, or sporting events can be a simple, yet effective approach to delivering your message.⁵

Send Appointment Reminders and Newsletters

Sending out text message and/or email reminders to patients when they are due for their eye examinations or emailing patients with newsletters about new medications,

treatments, or ocular health in general will help them to learn more about the importance of timely check-ups.

Advertise

This may be the most well-known and conventional method of raising awareness. Choice of media can be adjusted according to the community within which you are based. If your eye care center is located in a community with a high elderly population, for example, it is probably best to run television or newspaper advertisements. However, if you want to target the younger generation, or if your eye care center provides services targeted to younger populations (such as orthokeratology, myopia control, or cosmetic services), it is best to run advertisements on social media platforms, such as Instagram or Facebook.

Participation Approach

You can also promote awareness through community activities that encourage good eye health behavior.⁵ This can be as simple as explaining different eye conditions at a local community gathering. Another option is to display posters in your clinic that advocate good eye health practices, such as an infographic on following the “20/20/20” rule, which reminds patients to take breaks with screen use.

BARRIERS TO CARE

Awareness can only be as good as your patients' ability to access your clinic. One of the greatest barriers to health

care is access to health care facilities. If patients face barriers to access because of cost, distance, language, or other reasons, efforts to raise awareness will not enhance their eye health. Thus, creating better accessibility to care is a must when trying to raise awareness. This cannot be accomplished through the actions of one clinic alone; the combined efforts of the local government and health care facilities are required.

However, you can still play your part by providing local community centers with directions to your eye center, offering transportation services, giving the option for online appointment booking, stating whether your clinic is wheelchair accessible (and making it so, if not), stating and potentially expanding the languages your clinic provides services in, and forming/starting partnerships with local charities and nongovernmental organizations to further aid individuals with disabilities and/or financial barriers.⁵

ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

I believe preventive medicine is the future of health care, and this begins with us, our patients' eye health care providers. There are multiple ways to raise and promote awareness about eye health, and sometimes different options must be tested before deciding what is best for a community in order to provide the highest quality of care to the greatest number of people. It all begins with understanding your community's knowledge and needs before making any decisions that encourage changes in their behavior.⁵ ■

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MOHIT ADLAKHA, OD

- Optometrist, Eyecare Showroom, Toronto, Canada
- mohitadl@hotmail.com
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