

How a routine eye exam can save your life



Julie Beall might be a cancer patient, but she's truly defined by any number of other titles. She's a wife and mother, a registered nurse, a real estate professional, an MBA graduate, a small business owner and public speaker. She owns a glass art studio. She regularly volunteers at a medical clinic in Africa.

The 50-something is nowhere near retired although she is nearing retirement age. And she has a message for people of her generation and older.

“Get annual eye exams. Your life might depend on it.”

John Lahr, OD, EyeMed Medical Director and a fellow baby boomer agrees.

“The single most important thing anyone 50 years or older can do for their vision health is to book an annual eye exam. Once you pass the 50-year mark, your risk for several serious vision diseases increases and the odds of you requiring vision correction also climbs. What's more, your OD may see signs of a serious physical health condition you never associated with an eye exam.”

Nobody knows better than Beall. Two years ago she went for a routine eye exam near her home outside Dayton, Ohio, not knowing that her life was about to change forever.

“I didn't really suspect anything was wrong,” Beall said. “Maybe I was getting a little older. I thought I might need reading glasses. Maybe my eyes were getting a little tired.”

Beall's optometrist noticed an area off the side of the retina that looked unusual. After dilating her eyes, he noted what he thought was a detaching retina. Considering it an optical emergency, her optometrist referred her to an ophthalmologist who specialized in retinas. She

saw that doctor later the same day and was told she had choroidal melanoma, a potentially fatal form of cancer. Doctors treated Julie with radioactive plaque therapy.

According to Dr. Lahr, Beall's story of uncovering a serious health concern at the optometrist is not unusual. In addition to preserving eyesight, annual exams can be a window to serious medical conditions like high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease and high cholesterol.

"The average optometrist sees 2,500 to 3,000 patients annually. And it's not uncommon for there to be 50 to 60 times each year you have someone in the optometrist chair who hasn't had a physical in a while. You take a look at the back of their eye and you see early signs of something potentially serious," said Dr. Lahr. "More often, eye doctors recognize symptoms of serious vision disease when it's early enough to correct the condition or manage long-term vision issues."

Most Americans receive vision benefits through an employer. Regular adult vision care is not provided through original Medicare or the Affordable Care Act. Individual plans, like the recently introduced AARP MyVision Care, are an option for retirees who suddenly find themselves without vision benefits.

Dr. Lahr said those plans, specifically aimed at retirees, are key to helping benefits holders most in need.

"There is a certain segment of the older population that, might just say, 'Why should I get an eye exam if I don't have benefits that pay for new glasses or contacts?' " he said. "And people in their age group absolutely need annual exams more than people in other age groups."

Julie Beall agrees. That's why she's added new role to her ever-expanding list of titles: eye exam advocate.

"If I could just get everybody in the country to get an eye exam," she said recently. "Do it. It may save your life."

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