Optometry Tidbits
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The Importance of a Dilated Eye Exam

A common question we encounter at the Ashe Center’s optometry clinic is, “Do I have to get my eyes dilated?” While an optometrist is able to determine a patient’s glasses and contact lens prescription without it, dilating a patient’s pupils allows the optometrist to check the overall health of the eyes.

During the eye exam, an optometrist will put special drops into the patient’s eyes, causing the pupil (a dark opening in the center of the iris) to widen. It takes approximately 20 minutes for the drops to take effect. A dilated pupil allows an optometrist to see more of the retina (shown in Figure 1), the light-sensitive membrane at the back of the eye connected to the optic nerve. It is possible for optometrists to diagnose certain diseases and conditions, such as macular degeneration, retinal detachment, infectious diseases, and sometimes eye tumors. Even conditions that on the surface seem unrelated to the eyes can be detected through a dilated eye exam. For example, signs of diabetes and high blood pressure can be found.

There are some side effects to getting your eyes dilated. First, a patient’s near vision becomes blurry but will be back to normal in about four to six hours following the dilation. This can make it difficult to read, drive, text, and to use a computer. Also, a patient will become more sensitive to light. We often remind patients to bring sunglasses with them to minimize sensitivity to light and glare when leaving the Ashe Center. We provide disposable pairs as well. But these minor inconveniences are just a small price to pay in order to check the health of your eyes.

Figure 1. The portion of the retina that can be seen by an optometrist in an undilated pupil vs. a dilated pupil.

Figure 2. What the eye looks like after dilation – there is a temporary enlargement of the pupil.
Source: https://www.healthtap.com/#topics

Dilations are recommended every other year. However, there are other factors that may require dilations more often. For example, age is considered because the risk of eye disease increases as you get older. Also, a history of eye diseases or other health problems, such as diabetes, may require more frequent dilations. If it is your first eye exam, opting to do the dilation is important so that your optometrist can thoroughly assess the health inside of your eyes.

Sources: http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/eye-dilation/AN02048