Special Report on Aging and Vision Loss

Updated January 2013

A rapidly increasing proportion of the aging population experiences eye problems that make simple daily tasks difficult or impossible, even when wearing glasses or contact lenses. Severe eye problems are not just a matter of "getting older." The risk of severe eye problems has been found to increase significantly with age, particularly in those over age 65.

The Special Report on Aging is intended to draw attention to the disproportionate number of elderly individuals who have vision loss. Perhaps even more alarmingly, the trend is expected to continue to grow significantly as the baby boom generation continues to age. Experts predict that by 2030, rates of vision loss will double along with the country's aging population.

According to Prevent Blindness America (2008)[1], the four leading eye diseases affecting older Americans are age-related macular degeneration, cataracts, diabetic retinopathy, and glaucoma. As people age, they are far more likely to have serious age-related eye conditions. Younger people are less inclined to experience the full extent of the severity of age-related eye conditions until later in life. Thus, a well documented trend indicates that there is a continuously growing disproportionate number of seniors with severe age-related eye conditions.

A Note about Data Sources and Difficulties Establishing Estimates of Vision Loss across Age Groups

Reporting the demographic characteristics about people with vision loss is challenging because inconsistent measuring criteria are used to identify people with vision loss. Across surveys, criteria vary depending on the purposes and goals of the survey. Furthermore, the specific criteria for vision loss used in data collection can be a determining factor in how the frequencies of people with vision loss are distributed across age groups.

It has been commonly noted that two-thirds of the legally blind population are seniors who lost vision as a result of age-related eye diseases. In this instance, legally blind refers only

to a very specific portion of the population of people who experience vision loss. Legally blind refers to those with a central visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye with the best possible correction, and/or a visual field of 20 degrees or less. Surveys that use more lenient criteria for identifying people with vision loss have found that the age group with the most people who have vision loss is not seniors 65 years of age or older, but instead it is the baby boom generation-those between 45 and 64 years of age who are on the brink of aging into the senior age group and often have yet to experience the full extent of the severity of age-related eye conditions. In this instance, vision loss refers to anyone that experiences vision trouble with best correction. Vision loss refers to individuals who reported that they have trouble seeing, even when wearing glasses or contact lenses, as well as to individuals who reported that they are blind or unable to see at all.

In both of the examples, the frequencies and resulting distributions of people with vision loss across age groups are accurate but it would not be valid to compare the examples with each other. Furthermore, no clear agreement on how the frequencies of people with vision loss are distributed across age groups can be established because of the varying criteria used to identify people with vision loss. When the two examples are compared, the different criteria used to identify people with vision loss changed how people with vision loss were distributed across age groups. In the first example that explained two-thirds of the legally blind population are seniors, substantially more narrow criteria for vision loss only allowed for the data collection to account only for people experiencing the most severe vision problems. In the second example that explained that the age group with the most people who experience vision loss is the age group of people between 45 and 64 years of age, much more broad criteria for vision loss allowed for the data collection to account for anyone who experiences vision trouble with best correction.

Thus, the distribution of people with vision loss across age groups varies depending on the specific criteria for vision loss used in data collection. Investigators are urged to take this into account when comparing data sources. Unless the same criteria for vision loss are used in data collection, the comparison is not valid and it is not possible to establish agreement between different data sources.

Age-Related Prevalence Rates

Findings from the 2011 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS)[2] revealed the prevalence rate of vision loss in four mutually exclusive age categories. Prevalence rates are measures of all of the individuals in a specified population affected by a condition within a particular

period of time. Prevalence rates indicate how widespread a condition is. Prevalence also means "proportion" and is often expressed as a percentage.

Approximately 5.5% of Americans 18 to 44 years of age reported having vision loss, 12.0% of Americans 45 to 64 years of age reported having vision loss, 12.2% of Americans 65 to 74 years of age reported having vision loss, and 15.2% of Americans 75 years of age and over reported having vision loss.

- When compared to Americans age 18 to 44 years of age, Americans 45-64 years of age were more than twice as likely as to report vision loss.
- When compared to Americans 18 to 44 years of age, Americans 65-74 years of age were more than twice as likely to report vision loss.
- When compared to Americans 18 to 44 years of age, Americans 75 years of age and over were nearly three times as likely to report vision loss.
  The 2011 NHIS estimates pertain to the noninstitutionalized civilian population. Seniors in nursing homes, for example, are not included in these data. Thus, there is reason to believe that the rate of vision loss among seniors is substantially greater than indicated by the 2011 NHIS.

Please note that vision loss refers to individuals who reported that they have trouble seeing, even when wearing glasses or contact lenses, as well as to individuals who reported that they are blind or unable to see at all. AFB uses the term "vision loss", which is the equivalent of the term "vision trouble" on the 2010 National Health Interview Survey. Investigators should also note that, as mentioned, the NHIS estimates pertain to the noninstitutionalized civilian population.

The age related findings from the 2011 National Health Interview Survey are shown below in a table format.

Percentage of Americans with Vision Loss by Age

Age	Percentage of Americans with Vision Loss
18-44 years	5.5%
45-64 years	12.0%
65-74 years	12.2%
75 years and over	15.2%

1. Prevent Blindness America. Vision Problems in the U.S.: Prevalence of Adult Vision Impairment and Age-Related Eye Disease in America, update to the 4th ed. Schaumburg, IL: Prevent Blindness America, 2008.

2. Data source: National Center for Health Statistics, National Health Interview Survey, 2011, www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhis.htm. For further information, see "Schiller, J.S., & Peregoy, J.A. (2012). Provisional Report: Summary health statistics for U.S. adults: National Health Interview Survey, 2011. National Center for Health Statistics. Vital Health Stat 10(256)."