

# Avoid sacrificing your vision

"I ALWAYS feel like certain forms of blindness shouldn't be so prevalent, because they are avoidable," says Datuk Dr Linda Teoh Oon Cheng, consultant ophthalmologist and glaucoma specialist at Subang Jaya Medical Centre. She refers specifically to instances in which patients know that there is a high chance their vision could become damaged, yet do nothing about it.

Avoidable blindness includes conditions such as diabetic retinopathy and cataract. When detected early enough, the diseases can be treated and vision can be restored. According to the *Malaysian National Eye Survey* published last year, the most common causes of blindness were untreated cataracts (58.6%), diabetic retinopathy (10.4%) and glaucoma (6.6%). Overall, 86.3% of all cases of blindness were avoidable.

"A lot of the time, people think cataracts are caused by ageing and they won't do anything about it until they find their vision too blurry," says Dr Teoh. She also advises that unlike in the past, there is now no need to delay cataract removal with the advancement of technology.

"Long ago, people feared surgery because the wound is large and it takes time to heal, so people were advised to wait until their cataract is mature before opting for surgery."

Having said that, Dr Teoh urges those 55 years old and above to undergo eye screenings at least once a year. She says it is



People above 55 must undergo eye screenings at least once a year as certain forms of blindness can be avoided if treated early.

compulsory for those with diabetes, irrespective of age, to attend an eye screening. This is because diabetes can cause changes in your eyes. When your diabetes isn't controlled, you can get cataracts early, which will affect your vision. "We still have patients who have had diabetes for many years who never attend regular eye check-ups," she shares.

On the other hand, if your sight is affected by diabetic retinopathy, you can prevent yourself from going blind just by going for your regular screenings and check-ups and treating your diabetes.

Another kind of preventable blindness is glaucoma. While glaucoma cannot be cured, it can be controlled when detected early. A disease known as "the thief of

sight", many patients who have glaucoma are diagnosed in the later stages as it is painless and people don't know they are losing their sight because they don't feel pain. They only see the doctor when they realise something is really wrong with their vision and start knocking into things, or even discovering they can't see as well by accident.



Datuk Dr Linda Teoh Oon Cheng.

"I once had a patient who had something in his eye, so he closed and rubbed that eye to relieve the itch. To his shock, he then realised he couldn't see in the other eye. When he went to check, it was discovered that he had already gone blind from glaucoma in one eye."

Often, patients have incorrect perceptions. Dr Teoh says, "Patients often think everything is curable. Glaucoma patients tend to only ask doctors for help when they're already at an advanced stage of the disease when we can no longer do anything to restore their vision."

Glaucoma is related to genetics, so if there is a history of glaucoma in your family, it is advisable to get checked as early as possible, because if detected early on, doctors can assist in preventing it from progressing.

■ For more information, call 03-5639 1212.

## Worried about lumps and bumps?

LOOKING into a mirror, you might notice a small bump on your eyelid. You dismiss it, thinking it not worth the time to go to the doctor to get it checked out. However, Dr Nazila Ahmad Azli, consultant ophthalmologist and oculoplastic, lacrimal and orbital surgeon at Ara Damansara Medical Centre, thinks otherwise.

Dr Nazila says 80% of all abnormal growths on the eyelid are benign, and malignant growths are not common in Malaysia. However, she asserts, "It is important for the public to be aware and know how to differentiate between malignant and benign growths so they can seek treatment earlier."

She says some common causes for benign eyelid growth include infection of the lash follicles, which causes a sty and clogging of the eyelid's oil glands, which causes a chalazion.

Dr Nazila says recurrent chalazia could be a marker to a more sinister lesion. "When a chalazion recurs even after treatment, there is a large possibility that it is a sebaceous gland carcinoma, as both conditions affect the same eyelid gland."

For malignant abnormal eyelid growths, Dr Nazila says basal cell carcinoma takes up 90% of all malignant occurrences worldwide. The bump most commonly appears in the lower eyelid, but it can occur elsewhere around the eyelid. Risk is increased with age and excessive exposure to ultraviolet (UV) light. Individuals with fair skin are also at risk.

Other types of eyelid cancer include squamous cell carcinoma, sebaceous cell carcinoma and malignant melanoma.



Dr Nazila Ahmad Azli.

Both types of growths may interfere with the patient's life, causing blurred vision, eyeball compression, astigmatism and general discomfort.

### Early treatment can yield good results

If eyelid cancer is allowed to advance, it can cause eyelid and facial disfigurement. Dr Nazila, however, offers good news, saying, "Eyelid cancers rarely metastasise although they can be locally invasive. The prognosis is also very good when detected early."

With early diagnosis, treatment is fairly simple. Dr Nazila illustrates the usual process of either incisional biopsy or excision biopsy coupled with eyelid reconstruction. She says, "When we carry out a biopsy of the eyelid, we also take a good amount of normal tissue around the growth to ensure all malignant cells are removed from the body."

Other treatment options are Mohs micrographic surgery, frozen section technique excision, radiotherapy and chemotherapy,

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depending on the stage and severity of the disease.

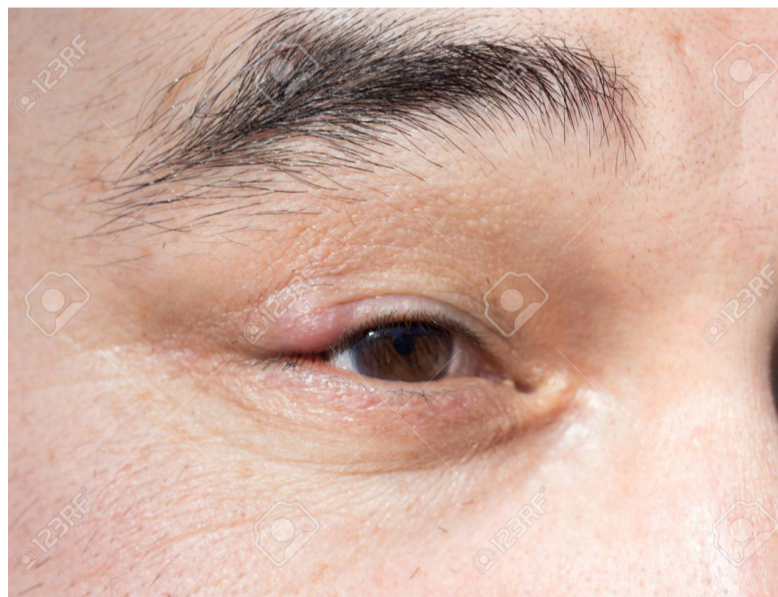
### Clean lids, clear vision

"Malignant eyelid growth risk factors depend on your age, family history, exposure to UV rays and previous malignoma. Farmers and fishermen, for example, are more likely to have malignant eyelid growths. People living in sun-exposed countries, such as Australia, have heightened risks, too."

Dr Nazila stresses that eyelid hygiene is important to halt benign eyelid growths, as problems normally arise from dirty lashes. "We are exposed to dust every day, and we expose our eyes to cosmetics that clog up the oil glands of the lids. This allows for the excess growth of bacteria that are normally present on the skin."

Her advice is to clean your eyelids at least twice a day with a warm towel or lid wipes to clear the debris from our eyelids. In addition, warm compresses on the eyes can also improve the oil flow from clogged glands.

■ For more information, call 03-5639 1212.



Though small, any abnormal growth around the eyelid must not be dismissed as it can be an early sign of eyelid cancer.

### Similar but different

While they may look similar, benign and malignant eyelid growths have their own distinct symptoms.

Benign	Malignant
Usually accompanied by pain, with the exception of chalazion	Usually painless except in the advanced stages
No loss of lashes	Loss of lashes
No loss of lid contour	Abnormal or loss of lid contour (The shape of the lid is no longer smooth)
Stye may develop abscess	Breakage or ulceration of the skin
Does not bleed upon touch or pressure	Can bleed upon touch or pressure
Normal surrounding skin	Thickening of surrounding tissue or skin