

Press Release

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Task Force Formed to Fight Preventable Blindness in Women **Two-Thirds of All Blind Americans are Women**

Boston, MA — Two-thirds of all legally blind Americans are women. Appalled by this statistic, derived from a large body of epidemiologic research, a group of scientists at the Schepens Eye Research Institute in Boston has joined forces with top vision experts throughout the U.S. to form the Women's Eye Health Task Force (WEHTF), the first organization dedicated to promoting eye health among women and their families. Its mission is to increase public awareness of the common eye diseases affecting women and, through education, improve eye health for all Americans.

“As scientists, we don't yet know all the factors involved in these high rates of eye disease in women,” says Ilene Gipson, Ph.D., senior scientist at Schepens Eye Research Institute and chair of the newly formed task force. “Certainly greater longevity among women accounts for part of the problem. Other factors may include nutrition and environment. Although we don't have all the answers, we do know that many eye diseases are preventable and treatable. This is the message we want to get out to women,” she says.

Although their message is for women of all ages, the Task Force is particularly interested in reaching older women and women who have young children, not only to educate these women but also to have an impact on the next generation. By targeting women in general, the Task Force also hopes to reach the entire family, since women are the main health care advocates for their husbands and aging parents as well.

The message, according to Gipson, is clear. To protect their vision and the vision of their families, women may need to make certain lifestyle changes. First, they must take charge of serious risk factors that are under their control, such as smoking, which can have serious impact on the health of the eye. Women must also be aware of early symptoms of eye diseases, particularly those to which they may be most susceptible (because of gender, age, or family background). Finally, women should get regular, thorough, age-appropriate eye examinations for themselves and for their families from an ophthalmologist or optometrist.

The Task Force, which held its first meeting at the annual Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology (ARVO) convention in Florida, plans a multi-faceted educational approach, which will include eye-health checklists and educational materials to be placed in the offices of primary care physicians, pediatricians, geriatricians, and gynecologists. Other means of achieving the Task Force's goals are: public service announcements, talks to women's groups, articles in magazines, conferences and symposia, updates for ophthalmologists and optometrists, and an informational web site for both the public and professionals.

Because they live longer than men, women are more frequently the victims of age-related eye diseases. Most of the serious blinding eye diseases — glaucoma, cataracts, and problems with the retina due to diabetes and macular degeneration—increase in prevalence with age. The average life expectancy (at birth) is now 80 years for women and 74 years for men. These extra years of life for women translate into a greater chance of acquiring one or more of these common, sight-threatening diseases. These diseases also increase the risk of other health problems, such as falls and resultant fractures. With the aging of the population, vision problems for women are expected to grow.

An important example of a disease whose prevalence increases with age is age-related macular degeneration (AMD), which is now the leading cause of legal blindness in the United States. AMD causes the macula (the central part of the retina) to deteriorate, destroying the sharp, central vision needed for seeing objects clearly and for common daily tasks such as reading and driving. Although there is no cure for AMD, smoking, diet, and genetics appear to be contributing factors. Therefore, quitting smoking (or, better yet, never starting) and modification of diet may help lessen the chance of getting AMD. Recent polls have shown that even though ten million Americans, mostly women, have some form of AMD, two-thirds of Americans have never heard of the disease and do not know how they can help to protect themselves and their family members.

Dry eye syndrome is another example of a disease that affects many more women than men. Dry eye occurs when people do not have enough tears or the correct composition of tears on their eyes to lubricate them and keep them comfortable. Although dry eye syndrome is extremely common in people over age 55 of both sexes, it is intrinsically two to three times more common in women at any age—probably an effect of hormones. Although dry eye syndrome is not a frequent cause of blindness, it is still an important public health problem. One reason for this is that it is so common. In fact, visits for dry eye syndrome are one of the leading reasons for patients to seek eye care. This is because its symptoms are very bothersome and lead to a decreased quality of life, reduced work capacity, and other problems. More importantly, dry eye syndrome is associated with a decreased ability to perform activities that require visual attention, such as reading and driving a car.

The Women's Eye Health Task Force believes that the educated person is the seeing person, and encourages women to seek information for maintaining their own eye health and that of their families. Additional information is available at the Task Force's website, which can be reached through <http://www.eri.harvard.edu/wehtf/>. The Schepens' volunteer patient liaison, Rich Godfrey, personally provides information on eye disease and related topics; he can be reached at **(617) 912-2569** and geninfo@vision.eri.harvard.edu.

The Schepens Eye Research Institute is the largest independent eye research institute in the world and is an affiliate of Harvard Medical School.

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