

# Vision Problems: Another Reason to Stop Smoking



Whether you're a smoker or not, you know all about the health risks smoking poses. From cardiovascular problems to cancer, the reasons to quit are plenty. Add vision problems to that list. It's true: smoking makes it more likely for a person to develop things, like cataracts and age-related macular degeneration.

We talked to VSP network doctor Glenda Brown, OD, to find out more. She practices in Alpharetta, Georgia, in the heart of the southern "tobacco belt."

"Over the years, I've found many patients who smoke are surprised to learn about the needless risks they're taking with their vision," she says.

She shares a study highlighted in JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association. It showed that regular smokers have more than double the risk of non-smokers to develop macular degeneration – a condition more than 10 million Americans now have.

But there's a whole list of vision problems that smoking can increase risk for. Here's a rundown:

- **Cataracts:** A Harvard Medical School study found smokers are three times as likely to develop the variety of cataract that's the most vision-threatening. And, twice as likely to get a less disabling form of a cataract.
- **Glaucoma:** A direct link between smoking and glaucoma hasn't been proven – yet. But, the connection is clear between smoking, high blood pressure, cataracts and diabetes – all are glaucoma risk factors.
- **Diabetic Retinopathy:** A Diabetes Care study showed smoking doubles diabetes risk. And, many people with the condition also develop retinopathy, which can damage vision.
- **Dry Eye:** Dry eye syndrome is more than twice as likely to impact smokers than non-smokers. This according to a recent University of Wisconsin study.

Dr. Brown has seen the effect quitting can have almost instantly on dry eye. After only a few days smoke-free, the condition often improves, she says.

"I can't tell you how many times I've had a patient come in with red, irritated eyes and complain about the gritty, burning sensation that accompanies most cases of dry eye," she says. "Giving up tobacco isn't easy, but patients who do usually find their dry eye syndrome improves quite rapidly."

Like all doctors, Dr. Brown joins the “you should quit” chorus with patients who smoke, but it’s an uphill battle. But there’s plenty of help out there – more and more all the time.

“The best strategy is to ask your family physician for help in breaking the addiction,” says Dr. Brown. “Quitting cigarettes is difficult, but your eyesight is certainly worth the effort.

For more information about how smoking or living with a smoker is affecting your eye health, visit your VSP eye doctor.