Glaucoma

Article

doesn't usually appear at the top of the list of health hazards for African-Americans. But if you're over 40 and Black, listen up.

A disease that attacks the optic nerve, glaucoma is the leading cause of blindness in African-Americans. It is three to four times more common in African-Americans than in Whites, according to the National Institutes of Health.

There are few warning signs until after major damage has occurred to the eye. Healthcare agencies estimate 3 million Americans currently have glaucoma, but only half of them even realize it. Why glaucoma is more likely to strike African-Americans -- and why it develops so much faster -- is a question that scientists are still trying to answer.

Some studies indicate that African-Americans between ages 45 and 65 are 14 to 17 times more likely to go blind from glaucoma than Caucasians with glaucoma in the same age group. Recently, the Glaucoma Research Foundation, based in San Francisco, surveyed 1,000 Americans, and more than half of the African-Americans who responded said they were unaware that they or members of their families were at high risk for the disease. Every African-American over the age of 40 is considered to be high risk. (Some studies put the age as low as 35.)

Glaucoma's relatively low profile makes it that much more difficult to detect, says Ansel T. Johnson, O.D., an African-American optometrist based in the Chicago area. "It is pretty much asymptomatic," Dr. Johnson notes. "I spend a lot of my time educating my patients." Studies show that early detection often brings good results.

Much of the information on the disease is spread by word of mouth or through grassroots networks. Dr. Johnson, for instance, puts out a glaucoma newsletter at least once a year for his patients, and he has computer-animated software in his waiting room to teach patients about the disease.

Defining Glaucoma

Glaucoma has many forms, the most common of which is primary open angle glaucoma, in which the eye's drainage canals become clogged over time. In the front of each eye is a small space called the anterior chamber. Clear fluid flows in and out of it to bathe and nourish nearby
In people with glaucoma, the fluid drains far too slowly, for reasons scientists still can't explain. That causes the pressure to build, and unless that pressure is controlled, the optic nerve may be damaged, and a loss of vision may result.

Most people with open angle glaucoma do not have symptoms or warning signs. When open angle glaucoma is identified and treated, patients usually respond well to medication. When it is not detected, gradual vision loss can occur. Angle closure glaucoma is rarer and differs in that the eye pressure usually escalates quickly. This may occur when the drainage canals are blocked and then unblocked, much in the same way a sink clogs when something covers the drain, and then drains when the clog is removed. With angle closure glaucoma, the iris and cornea are not as wide and open as they should be.

Again, early detection is vital, says Eve Higginbotham, M.D., chairperson of the Department of Ophthalmology at the University of Maryland. Laser treatments often are used in these patients: doctors create an opening in the iris so the pressure in front of the iris is the same as the pressure in back of it, Dr. Higginbotham explains.

Just the Facts

- Glaucoma is the leading cause of blindness in African-Americans. The most common form of the disease, open angle glaucoma, accounts for 19 percent of all blindness among African-Americans, compared with 6 percent in Caucasians.

- African-Americans over the age of 40 are at high risk of contracting the disease.

- There are no symptoms in the early stages of the disease. Vision is normal, and there is no pain. As the disease worsens, glaucoma patients may experience a loss of side vision.

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