

Joint survey underscores critical need for a Canadian National Vision Health Strategy to address eye health issues

Canadian Ophthalmological Society and Canadian Association of Optometrists partner to support private member's bill to create a Vision Health Desk

Toronto, ON, October 4, 2022 – In time for World Sight Day on October 13, the Canadian Ophthalmological Society and the Canadian Association of Optometrists have collaborated for the first time on a joint access research survey in the field of vision health. The survey is part of a continued partnership that will support the federal government's progress toward creating a national vision health strategy, identify gaps in the system and guide interventions in the future in an effort to coordinate and address eye health issues across the country.

While the survey revealed some issues related to eye care access, mostly driven by the pandemic, it also pointed to greater challenges, including a lack of understanding among Canadians about their eye health. Among those who did not visit an eye care professional in more than two years, over one-third (37 per cent) of respondents say the biggest reason is because they believe that there is nothing wrong with their vision. Meanwhile, in the past two years, two in five (41 per cent) Canadians have experienced or been diagnosed with one or more changes to their eye health which would necessitate a comprehensive exam, and points to a greater need for education about eye disease and vision loss.

"Despite blindness being the most feared disability for the large majority of Canadians, we're seeing a persistent lack of education about eye health, specifically around the major eye diseases which increase the risk of blindness without proper intervention," says Dr. Phil Hooper, President of the Canadian Ophthalmological Society. "Vision loss carries significant costs on an individual level, but also to the public health purse. However, 75 per cent of visual impairment is avoidable if detected and treated early, while reducing government spending in the long run."

Canadians' familiarity with eye diseases

The survey findings reveal that Canadians need more education and awareness of eye health and eye diseases, to fully understand the importance of regular, comprehensive exams.

When it comes to Canadians' knowledge on the leading eye diseases, their awareness remains unchanged from last year's survey conducted by the Canadian Ophthalmological Society. Most are familiar (62 per cent) with cataracts, yet only one-quarter (27 per cent) of Canadians know that cataracts are the leading cause of blindness in the country. Less than half (47 per cent) are familiar with glaucoma (this number decreases to 37 per cent for younger Canadians aged 18-34). Meanwhile, only 39 per cent are familiar with age-related macular degeneration (AMD) which is the second leading cause of blindness, affecting nearly 2 million Canadians. Fewer are

aware of diabetic retinopathy (22 per cent) and contact lens-associated dry eye disease (26 per cent).

“Blinding diseases affect older adults (55+) at much higher rates and as Canada’s population ages, the number of individuals affected by vision impairment will rise,” says Francois Couillard, Chief Executive Officer of the Canadian Association of Optometrists. “Given the importance of vision health and its effect on public health spending, the Government of Canada plays a critical role in developing vision health policies and all those involved in the delivery of eye health services have a role to play in supporting a successful outcome and pledges its ongoing collaboration to the realization of these objectives.”

The survey findings underscore a critical need to create a National Vision Health Desk at the Public Health Agency of Canada that will develop and implement a National Vision Strategy. Last June the Honourable Judy Sgro, Member of Parliament for Humber River – Black Creek, introduced a Private Member’s Bill, “*An Act to establish a national strategy for eye care*”. The Vision Health Desk would be responsible for the development and implementation of an evidence-based vision strategy that includes increased research funding, funding for public education and support, streamlining the approval process for new medicine and technology to treat/prevent vision loss, enhanced access to care for vulnerable populations, including Indigenous peoples, children, and seniors.

To learn more about the four major eye diseases and get information on overall eye health, visit seethepossibilities.ca or [Eye Health Library](#).

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About the Survey

An online survey of 2003 Canadians aged 18+ was completed between June 10 and June 21, 2022, using Leger’s online panel. No margin of error can be associated with a non-probability sample (i.e., a web panel in this case). For comparative purposes, though, a probability sample of 2003 respondents would have a margin of error of $\pm 2.2\%$, 19 times out of 20. Leger’s online panel has approximately 400,000 members nationally and has a retention rate of 90%.

About Canadian Ophthalmological Society

The Canadian Ophthalmological Society (COS) is the national, recognized authority on eye and vision care in Canada. As eye physicians and surgeons, we are committed to assuring the provision of optimal medical and surgical eye care for all Canadians by promoting excellence in ophthalmology and by providing services to support our members in practice. Our membership includes over 900 ophthalmologists and 200 ophthalmology residents. We work collaboratively with government, other national and international specialty societies, our academic communities (ACUPO), our provincial partners and affiliates and other eye care professionals and patient groups to advocate for health policy in Canada in the area of eye and vision health. COS is an accredited, award-winning provider of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) through the

Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada (RCPSC) and is an affiliate of the Canadian Medical Association (CMA). For more information, visit cos-sco.ca.

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About Canadian Association of Optometrists

Optometrists are independent primary health care providers and represent the front line of vision health. Optometrists practice in a range of settings: most work in private practice, others work in clinics, hospitals, community health centres, corporate optometry, research, teaching and administration. The Canadian Association of Optometrists (CAO) is the national voice of optometry. Recognized at home and internationally as a leading advocate for the profession, it is dedicated to providing leadership and support to its +5700 members to enhance the delivery of healthy eyes and clear vision for all Canadians. For more information, visit www.opto.ca.

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