



The Canadian Association of Optometrists emphasizes a persistent need for public education about eye health among Canadians and calls for a dedicated national strategy

Making eye health, vision care and rehabilitation services a population health priority requires a national strategy.

Ottawa, ON, August 26, 2024 – Ahead of the new school year and Parliament’s Fall session, the Canadian Association of Optometrists (CAO) unveils survey results about vision care and awareness of eye health. Conducted in June, the survey is part of an ongoing assessment to identify gaps and guide interventions for optimal vision care across the country. The survey shows some improvements compared to a 2022 survey but underscores persistent challenges in Canadians’ awareness of vision health.

“Despite 65% of Canadians expressing concern for their eye health, this survey underlines how little people know about it and the major eye diseases that increase the risk of blindness without proper intervention,” says Dr. Martin Spiro, President of the Canadian Association of Optometrists. **“Waiting for symptoms to appear can expose individuals to significant risks, particularly within an aging population, those engaging in increased near-work, and amidst a myopia epidemic among children.”**

More Than Meets The Eye

Over 8 million Canadians are at risk of eye-threatening conditions, with blinding diseases affecting older adults (55+) at much higher rates. As Canada’s population ages, the number of individuals affected by vision impairment will rise.

The survey findings reveal that increased education and awareness of eye health and eye diseases are needed so Canadians fully understand the importance of regular comprehensive exams.

Although familiarity with cataracts has increased (65% up from 62% in 2022), familiarity with other common eye diseases remains largely unchanged: 46% of Canadians are familiar with glaucoma, 39% with age-related macular degeneration (AMD), 28% with contact lens-associated dry eye disease, and 21% with diabetic retinopathy.

“Many serious eye conditions do not present obvious symptoms initially. **Integrating eye care into the healthcare routines of all age groups, from toddlers to seniors, is crucial** as 75 per cent of visual impairment is avoidable if detected and treated early,” continues Spiro.

Screen time and eye health

With advancements in technology, our everyday lives are increasingly revolving around digital devices for work, school, and leisure. As a result, there is a rise in a group of eye and vision problems related to digital screen use, known as computer vision syndrome or digital eye strain.

According to the survey:

- As in 2022, Canadian adults report spending an average of 7.1 hours on a screen, an increase from 6.4 hours prior to COVID.
- Parents report that their children have an average of 3.8 hours of daily screen time, down from 4.4 hours in 2022 but up from 2.9 hours prior to COVID-19.
- Nine-in-ten (89%) parents believe that prolonged screen time is harmful to their children's eye health, an increase from 83% in 2022.
- Among those whose children's screen time has increased since COVID, six-in-ten (62%) also agree that increased screen time has negatively impacted their children's eye health.

"As our reliance on digital devices increases, it is important to become more cognizant of our [behavior when using screens](#) and establish good habits for better eye health like taking regular breaks from the screen, blinking to alleviate dry or tired eyes, adjusting screens and reducing the glare, or using computer glasses", continues Spiro.

Children's use of digital media has increased and begins earlier in childhood, CAO also [recommends limiting screen time](#), encouraging outdoor activity over screen time.

As they enter school, it may be challenging to limit screen time as their visual demand is increased with virtual schooling and electronic entertainment. Therefore, getting into a good habit of taking regular breaks from screens every 30-60 mn helps relax their eyes. For all children, screen time is not recommended at least 1 hour before bedtime, to help with better sleep.

Balance video game time with plenty of creative, outdoor and quiet play. Studies have shown that an hour of outdoor time each day for children may help to delay the onset of myopia. Remember to wear sunglasses and sunscreen while outdoors.

Making Eye Care Routine

Many people overlook the importance of thorough examinations for early detection of vision and eye health issues. A comprehensive eye examination is the best tool for the early detection of eye disease and several systemic diseases.

According to the survey:

- 74% of Canadian adults say they get their eyes checked at least once every 2 years.
- 87% of respondents believe children should get an eye exam at least once every two years.
- 45% get their children's eyes tested every year.

“It is crucial that children get a comprehensive eye exam annually. Children's visual systems are developing and can change rapidly, making early detection of eye conditions like myopia essential to manage or slow its progression. Moreover, children often cannot articulate their symptoms as clearly as adults, they may not understand what “normal” vision is”, continues Spiro.

Therefore, the CAO recommends ¹that parents schedule comprehensive eye exams for their children starting at six to nine months, then again between the ages of two and five years, and annually thereafter to age 19. After 19, eye development stabilizes, allowing check-ups every two years for healthy adults with no known eye conditions. However, after age 65, yearly exams are recommended once again due to the increased incidence and risk of eye disease.

“While the survey shows that Canadians mainly rely on their eyecare professionals for information about eye health, we still need to debunk some persistent myths. That is why we are committed not only to providing optimal vision care but also to engaging in conversations with our patients about good habits and raising awareness about eye health all year long. However, ensuring optimal vision care nationwide requires a multifaceted approach,” continues Spiro.

Calling for a National Strategy

Eye health, vision care and rehabilitation services must become a population health priority. This requires efforts on multiple fronts, including investment in research, public education and support, streamlining the approval process for new medicine and technology to treat/prevent vision loss, and enhancing access to care for vulnerable populations, including Indigenous peoples, children, and seniors.

Private Member’s Bill C-284 aims to achieve these goals by creating *“An Act to establish a national strategy for eye care”*. Introduced in June 2022 by the Honourable Judy Sgro, Member of Parliament for Humber River – Black Creek, the Bill passed through the House of Commons in the spring and is currently at the Second Reading phase in the Senate, to be referred to the Social and Scientific Affairs Committee (SOCA).

“We hope to see more progress in the swift passage of Bill C-284 as Parliament reconvenes in September. We have been reaching out to Senators and will continue to do so, as we believe that Bill C-284 can bring significant positive changes to eye health and vision care in Canada, where the well-being of Canadian patients is paramount”, concludes Spiro.

¹ [Position Statement: Children’s Vision Screening and Comprehensive Eye Examinations](#)

To learn more about eye conditions, diseases, treatment options, examinations, safety and more, visit CAO' [Eye Health Library](#).

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About the Survey

An online survey of 2,000 Canadians aged 18+ was completed between June 5 and June 21, 2024, using Leger's LEO online panel. For comparison purposes, a probability sample of this size yields a margin of error no greater than 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 the Canadian Association of Optometrists

Optometrists are independent primary health care providers and represent the front line of vision health. Optometrists practice in various 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, CAO provides leadership and support to its 8,300+ members (optometrists, students and optometric assistants) to enhance the delivery of healthy eyes and clear vision for all Canadians. For more information, visit www.opto.ca.

For media inquiries, please contact:

Julie Vanghelder, Director, Communications & Marketing, jvanghelder@opto.ca.