Don’t Overlook Eye Care

September 9, 2015 By Cyntra Scott

As I sit waiting for my sister in the surgical waiting room at the Wilmer Eye Institute at John Hopkins medical center in Baltimore, Maryland, I am reminded of the importance of eye care. This is especially important for individuals with sickle cell disease (SCD) because of the potentially serious eye conditions that can occur.

If you have SCD you should be seen annually by an ophthalmologist. Be sure that you aren’t only seen by an optician. You must be examined by an ophthalmologist who is skilled to test for and detect serious eye conditions. This is why it’s important to know the differences between ophthalmologists, optometrists and opticians.

- Ophthalmologist - This medical doctor specializes in eye and vision care and must undergo at least eight years of training.
- Optometrist - This healthcare specialist specializes in vision changes, but is not a medical doctor. An optometrist is licensed to practice optometry to provide services such as eye exams, vision tests and prescribing eye glasses and corrective lenses and medications for eye diseases.
- Optician - This technician is trained to design, verify and fit eye glasses.

One eye condition caused by SCD is sickle cell retinopathy. This condition can threaten your vision and occurs when sickled red blood cells clog up blood vessels in the retina causing the tissue to become ischemic (damaged by lack of blood supply). This condition can damage the retina--the portion of the eye that processes visual images.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, “Vision loss, including blindness, can occur when blood vessels in the eye become blocked with sickle cells and the retina gets damaged. Some patients develop extra blood vessels in the eye from the lack of oxygen.”

The symptoms of retinopathy include blurred vision, floaters (colored spots that “float” through your field of vision), reduced night vision, vision blocked by streaks or splotches and sudden loss of vision.

Currently, sickle cell retinopathy is treated with laser surgery that can repair the blood vessels. But the laser surgery cannot always restore back to normal the vision of someone with the illness. This

is why the earlier retinopathy can be detected the better.
Experts stress that preventive care is key if sickle cell retinopathy is present. When you have SCD the last thing you need is an additional problem, such as loss of vision, so prioritize your preventive eye care.

What's more, we have to remember that SCD is a blood disorder in which the sickled cells travel throughout the body, potentially affecting every area where blood flows. For this reason, caring for SCD consists of being aware of how the disease affects the entire body. Sickle cell disease requires a multidisciplinary approach. This means SCD sufferers must enlist the expertise of several specialists throughout our lifetime.

I hope that in this post, I conveyed the importance of these recommended annual check-ups by an ophthalmologist for all individuals living with SCD.

In my next post, I'll share some vital information about sickle cell disease and hearing loss.

Be Well! Be Wonderful! Be You!

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.