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Our ageing population and unhealthy lifestyles are fuelling a steep decline in our vision. Right now almost two million people in the UK are living with sight loss and forecasters predict a further half a million could lose their sight by the year 2020.

Focus on eye health

Poor eye health places a huge economic and social burden on the UK. In 2013 sight loss cost the economy almost £8 Billion. Yet, according to research conducted by the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) half of all sight loss is avoidable.

By far the biggest risk to eye health is poor uptake of sight tests. Twenty million of us fail to have our eyes checked once every two years, as recommended, and one in 10 of us have never had an eye examination.

Essential health check

Sight tests are an essential health check. Not only can they assess your visual acuity and detect eye conditions, such as glaucoma, before they cause irreversible vision loss, they can also uncover signs of general health problems including diabetes, hypertension and high cholesterol.

Getting your sight tested is easy – there are qualified optometrists on almost every high street and for many of us it's absolutely free.

More than 30 million people in the UK are eligible for free sight tests paid for by the NHS, and millions more are entitled to tests paid for by their employer.

Regular sight tests are particularly important for children, the over 60s, people with a family history of eye disease, those with underlying systemic health conditions, such as diabetes and people of certain ethnic origins who have an increased risk of eye disease.

Lifestyle matters

Poor lifestyle choices pose another big threat to the UK's eye health. Sight loss linked to obesity and smoking is a growing trend amongst younger generations.

A poor diet, a high Body Mass Index (BMI), failing to protect your eyes from UV and a sedentary lifestyle can all have damaging affect your eye health.

As can smoking – smokers have a substantially increased risk of suffering common sight threatening eye diseases such as macular degeneration and cataracts.

For those whose sight loss is unavoidable there are some important medical developments on the horizon. Eye research charities like Fight for Sight and the National Eye Research Centre are funding pioneering research into some of the most common causes of sight loss whilst advances in stem cell therapies, laser treatments, ophthalmic drugs and lens technologies are all helping make sight loss a thing of the past.

Whatever you do this Week (21 – 27 September) make sure do something to ensure your eyes and vision stay healthy now and in the future.

For more advice on looking after your eyes take a look at the National Eye Health Week Top Tips leaflet. on www.visionmatters.org.uk.