

The eyes have it!

Springtime is the time to tidy up!

Tidy up the yard, tidy up the house and tidy up your health. I'll leave the yard and home tidy up to my John but I recently decided to get cracking with my health so I had my eyes checked. I found I just wasn't seeing so well, especially when I looked into the distance. I saw an eye shop just down the road so I made an appointment to get my eyes checked.

When I had my eyes checked and found that I needed glasses for the first time in my life! I was amazed at all the tests the optometrist did and all the little tricks she gave my eyes. I had to look at frogs and other shapes and colours and twirling patterns, and tell her if things were better or worse with different lights. She told me I was 'myopic' ... what the hell does that mean, my husband John asked. I thought to myself he should know as he is a doctor, but I told him it means that I can only see things well close to me, and I need help with glasses to see things far away. My John is just the opposite. He needs glasses to look at things close up. Then I had to choose some frames- this was fun with all different colours and shapes. Wearing the glasses now I can see properly when I am driving, see lovely sights from the distance. I have to be careful not to lose my glasses or sit on them.

Now if you are over the age of 30 years old, then you should start getting your eyes checked at least every 3 years, probably more often. The bad news is that adults with Down syndrome can get eye problems at an early age compared to other people (at about 30 years of age compared to 45 years), but the good news is that if you get your eyes checked regularly then you can get glasses or other treatment and keep seeing well.

Have a look at your eyes in the mirror. What do you see? What colour are your eyes?

The eyes are actually round like small golf balls that sit inside the head. They have tiny muscles attached outside and inside the head to make them move. Look to one side and look up. Your muscles are working. Do you see the eyelashes? Inside the eyelashes do you see white part (called sclera, conjunctiva and cornea) with a round coloured part in the middle (called the iris- what colour are your eyes) and inside that a black bit in the middle (called the pupil)? Well done. If you look carefully at someone else's eyes and shine a light in them you will see the black circle get smaller and larger. Try it and see. This black circle is to let light shine in. When you go outside and it is very bright- do you squeeze your eyes up because it is bright- this is when the black hole gets smaller, and when you are trying to find your way in the dark do you open your eyes really wide? This is because you are trying to let more light in.

But what are the sorts of things that can go wrong with your eye when you are an adult?

Well, you can find it hard to see things close up but you can see things a long way away. This means you are farsighted. Have you ever used a round magnifying glass to make the things you look at seem bigger? Or have you seen your grandmother use one to read the phone book? Our eyes get lazy as they get older and refuse to let us see things clearly. This is called presbyopia. So we might need glasses to make things look bigger for us.

Have you ever been in a car when the windows fog up? I'll bet you have this past winter. Well this can happen to the eyes too. Behind the black circle in the middle of your eye lens- it is supposed to be clear like glass and help you see things clearly. But when it fogs up, this is called a cataract. It means that the glass of your eye is fogged up. Luckily, the glassy bit or lens can be replaced and you can see back to normal.

Another thing that can happen to your eyes is with the clear plastic like covering of your eye. The eye can get a little bulge or lump which can make it quite difficult for you to see. This is a long word called keratoconus. It can happen in adults with Down syndrome more often than in other people. But, again the good news is that it can be fixed if found early.

So what should you do for a spring clean of your eyes?

Get them checked if you are an adult with Down syndrome aged 30 years or older. Make an appointment with an optometrist in your local area. Your family doctor may know one who is good. Don't worry if you have trouble reading words; the optometrist might use smarties and hundreds and thousands to see if you can see them. Another good thing is that there are no needles. There are some bright lights but mostly it is quite fun to have your eyes checked. If the optometrist finds something wrong with your eyes, they may say you need glasses or they may say you need to see an eye doctor. Ask the optometrist to please send you and your doctor a report.

The last word for this month is...after you turn 30, you should get your eyes checked every spring.

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SHAID clinic for adults with Down syndrome is held the second Thursday of every month at the Mater Hospital.