


Comprehensive eye check-ups will help improve glaucoma care, say experts

National programme should take an initiative to incorporate diagnosis and treatment of glaucoma, they suggest

March 09, 2023 10:01 pm | Updated 10:03 pm IST - CHENNAI

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With the World Glaucoma Week all set to be observed from March 12, the emphasis on improving detection of glaucoma is louder than before. File

Awareness on glaucoma, a silent disease and the second most common cause of blindness globally, still remains low. While improving awareness and knowledge will pave the way to better detection rates, experts suggest that at the level of individuals and vision care professionals, comprehensive eye check-ups will help in early detection, and at the policy-level, it is time to consider incorporating diagnosis and treatment of glaucoma in the National Programme for Control of Blindness.

With the World Glaucoma Week all set to be observed from March 12, the emphasis on improving detection of glaucoma is louder than before.

L. Vijaya, senior consultant, Glaucoma Services, Sankara Nethralaya, said, “Glaucoma is a chronic disease that impacts vision. By definition, it means a group of eye disorders which have common characteristic features of raised eye pressure, damage to the optic nerve that takes away the field of vision. If left untreated, it could lead to blindness.” Noting that it was the second most common cause of blindness in the world, she said, “Unlike cataract, blindness due to glaucoma is irreversible.”

There are two types - open-angle glaucoma and closed-angle glaucoma. There will be about 112 million persons worldwide aged 40 to 80 years with glaucoma by 2040, she added. “Awareness is fairly good in developed countries when compared to developing countries like India. Glaucoma is a silent disease, so unless you look for it, diagnosis can be missed. Detection of disease is directly related to awareness and knowledge. In India, detection rate is poor due to low awareness and knowledge,” she noted.

According to the population-based Chennai Glaucoma Study, 90% of newly diagnosed persons did not know they had glaucoma. This undiagnosed segment accounted for 50% in the developed world, she recalled.

“In India, hardly 10% of glaucoma cases are detected. Glaucoma runs in the families. This increases the risk by six to eight times. So, people with a family history of glaucoma should undergo check-ups. If any member of a family has glaucoma, they should inform the first degree relatives so that it could pave the way for early detection,” Ronnie George, Director, Glaucoma Services and Director, Research, Sankara Nethralaya, said.

Dr. Vijaya observed that whoever goes to a vision care professional should get a comprehensive eye examination done. This would help in not only diagnosis of glaucoma but also would help in picking up any eye disorder.

“Most people go for eye tests to only get glasses. However, persons aged above 40 years should undergo eye check-ups like the general health check-ups to identify eye diseases most of which are preventable and treatable,” Dr. George added.

“We feel that the national programme should have an extension or a piggyback approach to include chronic diseases with severe blindness rate such as glaucoma. The NGOs involved in the cataract blindness control programme should take one step further to improve the programme by including glaucoma. The time has come for change. The national programme should take an initiative to incorporate diagnosis and treatment of glaucoma to specifically improve care for those in rural areas,” Dr. Vijaya emphasised.