

# HEALTH REPORT

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## STAGGERING NUMBER OF AUSTRALIANS IN THE DARK ABOUT GLAUCOMA

Startling new research released today shows that three quarters of Australians are unaware that one of the most common causes of blindness, glaucoma, can cause permanent vision loss.

The research, published in the latest issue of the Pfizer Australia Health Report, was conducted with Glaucoma Australia.

It found alarmingly high levels of ignorance of glaucoma among young people, with a staggering 82 percent of Australians under 30 unaware that glaucoma can cause blindness.

The research also shows widespread ignorance of treatment options with seven-in-10 Australians lacking knowledge and one quarter incorrectly believing glaucoma can be cured.

"The harsh reality is that glaucoma cannot be cured, but it can be treated effectively, especially if caught early. Early diagnosis is crucial to reduce avoidable blindness," said Glaucoma Australia National Executive Officer Beverley Lindsell.

"Glaucoma slowly destroys vision and damage is irreversible, but treatment can slow or arrest the process," said Mrs Lindsell.

"Regular eye examinations that test for pressure in the eye as well as the health of the optic nerve are the most effective early detection methods.

Glaucoma is a disease of the optic nerve, often associated with high pressure of the fluid (aqueous) inside the eye that helps it retain its shape. Glaucoma is more common as people age, but can occur at any age."

According to Glaucoma Australia, the condition affects more than 300,000 Australians. Of this group, only half are currently diagnosed<sup>1</sup>.

“Glaucoma has a genetic basis, so people with a family history of the condition are at risk of inheriting it,” said Mrs Lindsell.

“People with diabetes, migraines and short sightedness may also be at risk, as are people with a past or present prolonged use of cortisone (steroid) medicines.”

One in five Australians report using cortisone for longer than four months. For people with a family history of glaucoma, a strong association has been made between inhaled corticosteroid use (such as inhalers for asthma) and glaucoma. The risk increases for people who use more than four puffs per day<sup>2</sup>.

“With the high incidence of asthma in this country, this finding suggests that people with asthma need to be aware of their family history of glaucoma and have regular eye tests to ensure early detection,” said Mrs Lindsell.

#### **Other findings:**

- 18 percent of Australians surveyed have a family history of glaucoma; 17 percent did not know if they had a family history;
- Only 20 percent said they have a very good or good understanding of glaucoma, with the majority of these being over the age of 50;
- Less than half of those polled said they would go to an ophthalmologist or optometrist for information about glaucoma; the majority said they would go to a GP or use the Internet;
- One in five Australians surveyed reported knowing someone who has glaucoma – most of these reported knowing relatives (alive or deceased) with glaucoma; and
- Three in five Australians polled wear glasses or contact lenses.

To assist with educating the public about glaucoma, Glaucoma Australia has partnered with Pfizer Australia to produce this month’s edition of the Pfizer Australia Health Report. Filled with useful information, free copies can be requested by phoning **1800 675 229** or by visiting [www.healthreport.com.au](http://www.healthreport.com.au) where people can also sign-up for email alerts of future editions, or through Glaucoma Australia on 1800 500 880.

The findings on Australian attitudes and feelings towards glaucoma are based on responses from 1,474 people aged 18 and over. The research was conducted in May 2004 by independent consultants Stollznow Research.

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**NB: INTERVIEWS WITH EXPERTS AND GLAUCOMA SUFFERERS ARE AVAILABLE IN EACH STATE.**

**For more information please contact Hausmann Communications:  
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<sup>1</sup> Blue Mountains Eye Study - Save Sight Institute and Department of Ophthalmology, University of Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

<sup>2</sup> Ophthalmology Journal (American Academy of Ophthalmology). 106(12):2301-6, 1999 Dec