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Eye drops delay glaucoma in the group most at risk

By Kathleen Fackelmann, USA TODAY

Daily eye drops might prevent or delay glaucoma in African-Americans at high risk of developing this blinding eye disease, a study reports today.

The findings make an urgent case for screening blacks early for warning signs of glaucoma, says Paul Sieving, director of the National Eye Institute, part of the National Institutes of Health, which paid for the study. Open-angle glaucoma affects more than 2 million Americans and is the leading cause of blindness among African-Americans, he says.

Researcher Michael Kass of Washington University-St. Louis and his colleagues had shown in a previous study that prescription eye drops that lower pressure in the eye could ward off glaucoma in white Americans. The new study, published in this month's *Archives of Ophthalmology*, is the first to focus on blacks. The people in the study didn't have glaucoma but did have elevated pressure in at least one eye, a major warning sign of the disease.

Glaucoma develops when the fluid in the eye drains too slowly, leading to high pressure and eye damage. In the early stages of the disease, people typically don't notice anything. By the time symptoms become apparent, the disease is advanced. People with glaucoma gradually lose peripheral vision and can become legally blind.

Kass and his colleagues gave half the African-Americans with high eye pressure the daily drops, and half received the standard care — frequent checks for any sign of disease but no eye drops.

Daily eye drops reduced the number of people who developed the disease by about half: The team found that 8.4% of the African-Americans who received eye drops developed the disease, compared with 16.1% of those in the standard-care group.

The study confirmed other reports suggesting that black Americans are at higher risk of the disease than white Americans, says Mildred Olivier, a spokeswoman for Prevent Blindness America of Schaumburg, Ill. Scientists suspect that the disease is more aggressive in blacks, leading to greater damage at an earlier age.

The researchers suggest that black Americans get an eye exam once every two years starting at age 40. Everyone else should get eye exams, too, but they can start at age 60, says researcher Eve Higginbotham of the University of Maryland.

Not everyone with high eye pressure will go on to develop glaucoma, so people should ask their doctors about the risk and whether they should start using eye drops, she says.

A second study published in the same journal suggests that popular cholesterol-lowering drugs also might ward off glaucoma.

Researcher Gerald McGwin of the University of Alabama-Birmingham and his colleagues found that people taking statin drugs to reduce high blood cholesterol were less likely to develop glaucoma. The preliminary study needs to be confirmed by larger, controlled studies before doctors can say that statins prevent glaucoma.