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DRINKING  
BECOMES  
A PROBLEM**

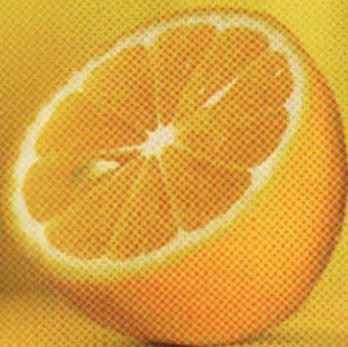
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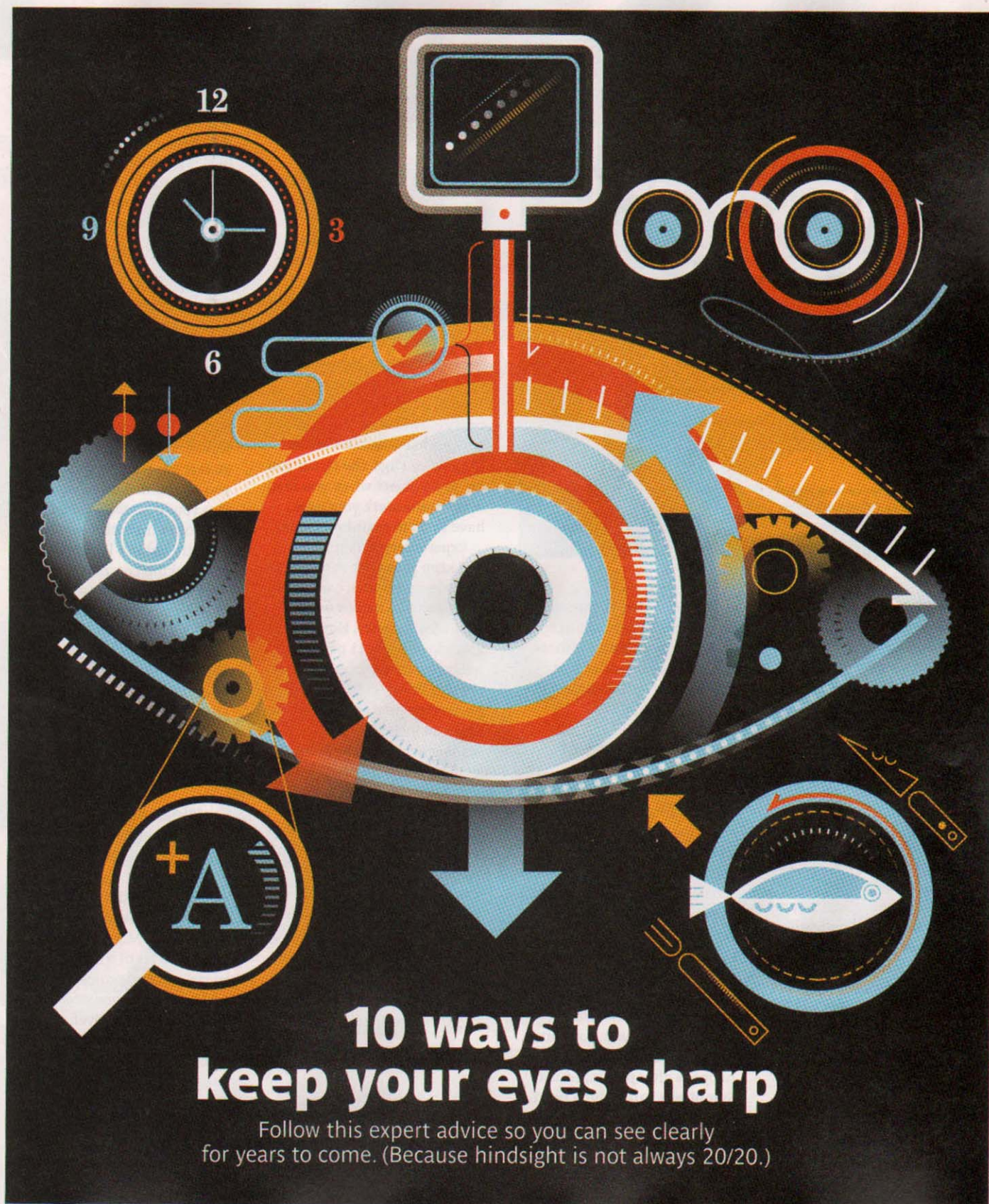
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# 10 ways to keep your eyes sharp

Follow this expert advice so you can see clearly for years to come. (Because hindsight is not always 20/20.)



In a 2012 survey from the American Optometric Association, more than half of the respondents reported that they valued their eyesight more than their memory or ability to walk. However, you may be making little decisions every day that could be compromising your most indispensable sense. “Constantly interacting with screens, missing out on essential nutrients, forgetting your sunglasses—these innocent-sounding habits can stealthily take a toll on healthy eyes,” says optometrist Hilary L. Hawthorne, a trustee of the American Optometric Association. Also, we often skip yearly eye exams, which puts not only our eyes but also our over-

all health at risk. Fortunately, it’s relatively easy to turn things around. Many of these expert-recommended tips can be done in the blink of a you-know-what.

### 1 | **Keep screens at a distance.**

Screens have proliferated far beyond laptops and desktops. Now there are smartphones, tablets, e-readers, and MP3 players—not to mention the screens that we encounter at airports, subway and train stations, movie theaters, and sporting events. The contrast and the glare of an electronic screen can eventually lead to eyestrain and, in some cases, computer vision syndrome, which happens after prolonged use. Symptoms can include headaches, blurred vision, neck pain, dry or red eyes, fatigue, double vision, and difficulty refocusing.

It’s actually middle-aged people who spend the most time in front of screens—an average of 9.5 hours a day, according to a study by the Council for Research Excellence. “Not only are we viewing screens for longer periods without breaks, but we’re working with handheld devices at closer distances than we would with printed materials,” says optometrist Mark Rosenfield, Ph.D., a professor of clinical education at the State University of New York College of Optometry, in Manhattan. (And as you age, the closer you are to an object when you read it, the more work your eyes have to do to maintain focus.)

Experts recommend that you keep your eyes at least an arm’s length from a computer screen and 16 inches from a handheld device. However, according to a 2011 paper published in the journal *Optometry and Vision Science*, people on average hold smartphones about 14 inches away when reading and sometimes as close as seven inches.

If you can’t easily read the text on your handheld’s screen from at least 16 inches away, increase the font size. To minimize eyestrain with any device, make sure that you’re reading in soft lighting that doesn’t cause glare. For a desktop computer, consider investing in an antiglare filter that clips to the monitor (such as 3M’s, \$58, amazon.com).

### 2 | **Take blinking breaks.**

In everyday life, we blink about 15 to 20 times a minute. But that rate drops by half when we’re viewing text on a screen. “Blinking is important because the upper eyelid spreads tears over the front of the eye, or cornea, just like a windshield wiper works,” says Rosenfield. “If you don’t do it enough, the cornea can dry out and feel irritated.” He recommends using the 20/20/20 rule when staring at a screen: Every 20 minutes, look 20 feet away for 20 seconds so you can blink naturally and give your eyes time to relax. If you suffer from chronically dry eyes, try using a laptop instead of a desktop computer. When you’re looking down at a laptop, less eye surface is exposed and there’s less tear evaporation and your eyes stay more moist. If you have to use a desktop, raise your chair or tilt your screen four inches below eye level, as measured from the center of the screen, so you aren’t looking straight ahead.

### 3 | **Wear shades.**

Over time, exposure to ultraviolet (UV) rays can deteriorate vision, leading to cataracts (a clouding of the eyes’ lenses); age-related macular degeneration, or AMD (loss of sight in the center of the field of vision); and noncancerous and cancerous growths on the eyes’ surface, eyelids, and surrounding skin, according to optometrist Rachel Cohn, the owner of the Wink Eyecare Boutique, in Potomac, Maryland.



The American Optometric Association recommends sunglasses that block at least 99 percent of UVA and UVB radiation and that screen out 75 to 90 percent of visible light. Look for an "ANSI" sticker on the sunglasses, which indicates that they meet these guidelines as proven by the American National Standards Institute. And if you plan to spend a lot of time outdoors, it's a good idea to get sunglasses with lenses that are polarized, which means that they've been treated to reduce glare.

Though a new generation of contact lenses can help deflect some of the sun's harmful rays (such as Acuvue TrueEye, which is popular among dry-eye sufferers), they don't cover the eyelids, "so you'll still want to top off with a pair of sunglasses," says Cohn.

#### 4 | Try a seafood diet.

You probably know that omega-3 fatty acids can bolster heart and brain health, but they can also decrease your risk of eye disease. According to a study published in the 2011 *Archives of Ophthalmology*, women who ate canned tuna and dark-fish meat (mackerel, salmon, sardines, bluefish, swordfish) just once a week had a 42 percent lower risk for AMD than those who ate such fish less than once a month. "Fish oils and fish-oil supplements are loaded with antioxidants that help prevent the

damage from free radicals that can cause diseases like AMD," says Tanya Zuckerbrot, a registered dietitian in New York City. Another reason to go fish: Increasing your intake of omega-3s may also support healthier tear film. (Eat at least five to six four-ounce servings of fatty fish weekly.)

#### 5 | Go for the greens.

Carrots have a reputation as the go-to vegetable for healthy eyesight, and it's true that "getting shortchanged on vitamin A, a key nutrient in carrots, could contribute to the deterioration of your vision," says Zuckerbrot. But the real star nutrients are lutein and zeaxanthin—pigments found in such foods as dark, leafy greens, broccoli, zucchini, peas, and Brussels sprouts. Researchers from the University of Georgia in Athens discovered that leafy green vegetables may improve vision by reducing the stressful effects of glare and exposure to bright light, because they help absorb some of that light.

Further evidence for the power of produce: A British study published in the 2011 *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* revealed that vegetarians had a 30 percent lower risk of developing cataracts than people who ate 3.5 ounces of meat a day.

#### 6 | Start steeping.

You may want to swap that afternoon cup of coffee for green tea: Not only is it hydrating (which helps you produce tears) but the brew also contains catechins, which are among a host of antioxidants (like vitamins C and E, lutein, and zeaxanthin) that may



defend the eyes' tissues from AMD and cataracts. Research from the Chinese University of Hong Kong has proven that catechins are absorbed in the highest concentrations by the tissues in the retina, the part of the eye that detects light.

#### 7 | Treat contacts with care.

Approximately 85 percent of those who wear contacts claim that they're caring for their lenses properly, but only 2 percent really are, found one study conducted by the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, in Dallas.

#### PAYING FOR EYE EXAMS

More than a third of us skip eye exams because we're concerned that insurance won't foot the bill, revealed a 2011 report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "People often think they're not eligible unless they have a special vision-care plan," says Ruth D. Williams, M.D., a former president of the American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO). But regular health insurance typically covers screenings for those with an increased risk factor for disease, such as a family history of glaucoma. Are you under-insured? The public-service organization Eye Care America (administered by the Foundation of the AAO; [eyecareamerica.org](http://eyecareamerica.org)) provides free or reduced-cost exams and eye care to those who qualify.



“One of the most harmful infractions is moistening contacts with saliva instead of saline solution. This introduces hundreds of bacteria to your eye.”

“One of the most harmful but common infractions is moistening contacts with saliva instead of saline solution,” says Eliot Grossman, the chief of eye health and optometry for LensCrafters, in Orange County, California.

“Hundreds of bacteria from your mouth will be introduced directly to your eye, which could cause a serious infection.” The same is true for water or any other “nontraditional” substance. (In one study, people fessed up to moistening contacts with everything from beer to butter to baby oil.) And always store lenses in fresh solution.

Grossman also recommends removing lenses even before naps and giving your eyes a break by wearing glasses once a week. And to keep your contacts and their case bacteria-free, wash your hands before handling them and replace contacts as frequently as prescribed.

### 8 | **Make over your makeup routine.**

Bacteria can thrive in mascara, so toss the tube after three months. Also, sharpen liner pencils regularly. It’s OK, of course, to line the base of your lashes, but “putting liner inside the lash line can block the oil glands, which protect your eyes’ surface,” says Ruth D. Williams, M.D., a former president of the American Academy of Ophthalmology.

### 9 | **Get your goggles on.**

You don’t have to work on a factory floor to sustain an on-the-job injury. According to a 2008 study from the American Academy of Ophthalmology and the American Society of Ocular Trauma, of the 2.5 million eye injuries that Americans suffer annually, nearly half happen at home.

“People understand that you need safety glasses or goggles when using power tools. But we should also wear them for things like yard work, basic home repairs—like sawing, sanding, drilling, nailing, painting—and certain cleaning jobs, like cleaning the oven,” says Justin Bazan, a Brooklyn-based optometrist and a medical adviser to the Vision Council. “Chemicals tough enough to clean appliances will damage eyes on contact.”

### 10 | **See a doctor.**

Even if you’re not among the 81 percent of Americans who need corrective eyewear, experts recommend that all adults get a comprehensive eye exam (during which the doctor dilates your pupils with drops) by age 40. Follow up with yearly exams thereafter or as recommended. Go sooner if you have symptoms such as persistent pain inside or behind your eyes, redness, or gradual loss of vision. You also may need to start earlier if a family member had glaucoma or you have diabetes, which puts you at a higher risk for vision-related issues.

A comprehensive eye exam can also be an important barometer of overall health. “The eyes are the only part of the body where we can view arteries and veins without surgery or incisions,” says optometrist Andrea P. Thau, an associate clinical professor at the State University of New York College of Optometry and a spokesperson for the American Optometric Association. “This allows an eye doctor to assess your risk for things like stroke, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, brain tumors, aneurysms, and multiple sclerosis.”



**dry eyes?** Find the best soothing solutions (even if you hate using drops) at [realsimple.com/eyetreatments](http://realsimple.com/eyetreatments).

### **ARE YOUR HABITS HURTING YOUR EYES?**

Optometrist Hilary L. Hawthorne, a trustee of the American Optometric Association, sheds some light on what’s unhealthy and what’s not so bad.

#### **THE HABIT: Reading in low light.**

**THE TRUTH:** “Eyes can work well even in dim light. In fact, this helps the ocular muscles react optimally—provided that you’re not in the pitch dark, of course—and that can keep your vision sharper longer,” says Hawthorne.

#### **THE HABIT: Waiting to get a stronger prescription for glasses or contact lenses.**

**THE TRUTH:** Using a weak prescription won’t necessarily make eyes worse. The problem is that “the symptoms, like blurred vision, that are prompting you to get a stronger prescription may be caused by a more serious, undetected problem, such as cataracts,” says Hawthorne. And that can be caught only with a comprehensive eye exam.

#### **THE HABIT: Constantly using eyedrops that reduce redness.**

**THE TRUTH:** Doctors don’t recommend long-term use of redness-alleviating drops. Although initially they help to restrict the blood vessels in the eyes (“getting the red out”), that effect eventually wears off and causes a rebound effect. “You’ll have a much redder eye that’s resistant to the drops,” says Hawthorne. Instead, use artificial tears (made with saline) as recommended by your doctor.