


WEHTF **Facts** 2007

Are women more likely to be blind or visually impaired than men?

Globally: Nearly two out of three people who are blind or visually impaired are women. Thirty-seven (37) million people are blind and 124 million are visually impaired. **USA:** 1 million people are legally blind, and 700,000 of these are women. Similarly, 3.4 million people are visually impaired and 2.3 million of these are women. **Age:** Women live longer than men, and many eye problems are age-related. **Other factors:** Some eye diseases are intrinsically more common in women. For example, dry eye syndrome is more prevalent in women, women are at higher risk of autoimmune diseases that may affect the eye, and social or economic factors may limit women's access to eye health care.

What can be done now?

Three quarters of blindness and vision impairment can be prevented or treated. Women can help themselves and their families to lower the risk of eye disease (as well as heart disease, cancer, diabetes and stroke) by practicing and encouraging:

- Eye exams for the whole family
- No Smoking 
- Maintenance of a healthy body weight

What is the science?

In 2001, a meta-analysis of 70 population-based, blindness prevalence studies demonstrated that two-thirds of all blind and visually impaired persons throughout the world are women (1). In 2004, an analysis of data from eight blindness and low vision prevalence studies did not find increased rates of blindness in women, per se, but the age-adjusted prevalence of low vision was

significantly higher for women among white persons, while it did not differ significantly by gender among black or Hispanic persons (2). Yet another study, published the same

year, suggested that visual impairment increases with age and is greater in Latina women than in Latino men (3). Gender differences in rates of blindness and visual impairment, when noted, can be accounted for by:

Female longevity -- Because women live longer than men, they experience more blindness due to age-related diseases. Two of the more important of these are cataract and age-related macular degeneration (AMD).

Intrinsic factors -- A number of eye diseases are intrinsically more prevalent in women. For example, dry eye syndrome has been shown to be two-to-three times more prevalent in women than in men, at any given age (4). In addition, women are at higher risk of several autoimmune (rheumatologic) diseases, which often have important ocular manifestations. Some of the most common of these diseases include systemic lupus erythematosus, rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis, and Sjögren's syndrome.

Access to health care -- Greater prevalence of blindness and visual impairment in women may be associated with social or economic factors limiting access to care. Frequency and quality of health care sought by, or available to, women may be different than health care sought by or available to men.

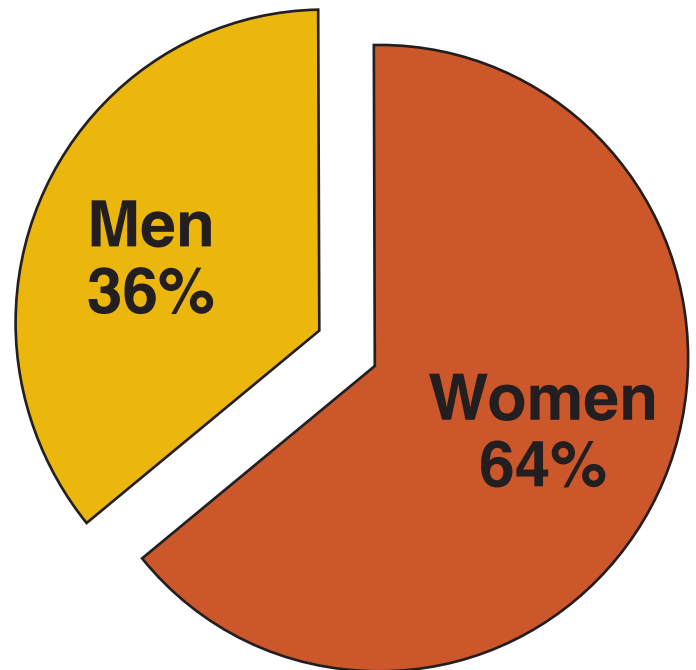
Behavioral and environmental factors that can increase the risk of developing eye problems -- while not intrinsic to gender -- include: poor nutrition, obesity (a risk factor for diabetes/diabetic retinopathy) and, especially, smoking. Smoking is a proven risk factor for the eye diseases, cataract and AMD.

Therefore, either by virtue of absolute numbers or greater risk, women need to know about preventing blindness and visual impairment for themselves and for their families and communities.

References

1. Abou-Gareeb I, Lewallen S, Bassett K, Courtright P. Gender and blindness: a meta-analysis of population-based prevalence surveys. *Ophthalmic Epidemiol* 2001; 8:39-56.
2. The Eye Disease Prevalence Research Group, Causes and prevalence of visual impairment among adults in the United States, *Arch Ophthalmol* 2004; 122:477-485.
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4. Schaumberg DA, Gardiner M, and Schein OD. Epidemiology of major cornea and external diseases. In: Smolin and Thofts' *The Cornea, Scientific Foundations and Clinical Practice*. Eds. Foster CS, Azar DT, Dohlman CH. Lippincott Williams & Wilkins: Philadelphia PA. 4th Edition. pp. 205-222.

Global Rates of Blindness



What is the WEHTF?

The Women's Eye Health Task Force (WEHTF) was formed to actively address the need for better understanding of gender and blindness issues. The WEHTF is based at The Schepens Eye Research Institute (SERI) in Boston, Massachusetts, USA and can be reached through its website at

www.womenseyehealth.org

The WEHTF is committed to reducing the burden of blindness and visual impairment through: advocacy for women's eye health issues; supporting public education concerning prevention and treatment of eye disease; building awareness within professional organizations of women's eye health issues; and ensuring that eye research priorities reflect the importance of women's eye health.

Acknowledgments

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