

Clear Vision:

A Key to Fall Prevention Among Seniors

vsp
vision care



**More than 12 million Americans
aged 40 years and older
experience vision impairment,
and with an aging population,
this number is expected
to double by 2050.**

The Human and Economic Costs of Falls

As our senior population continues to grow, maintaining member health and preventing accidents has become paramount. Among the many potential health concerns of older Americans, falls are one of the most significant and underestimated threats. Falls can lead to severe injuries, reduced mobility, decline in overall well-being, and death. Falls are the leading cause of fatal and nonfatal injuries among older adults.¹ In 2020, falls among adults aged 65 and older led to three million emergency

department visits and more than 36,000 deaths, making it the leading cause of injury death for that group. (For comparison, this is roughly the population sizes of Parkland, Florida; Claremont, California; Woodstock, Georgia; and La Porte, Texas.)

The economic costs associated with falls are another burden members and health plans are carrying—a burden that is projected to double in just a few short years. Today, older adult falls cost \$50 billion in medical costs annually,

75 percent of which is paid for by Medicare and Medicaid. And according to the [CDC Injury Center](#), the cost of treating injuries caused by falls is projected to exceed \$100 billion by 2030,² unless simple, cost-effective steps are taken.

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\$100 billion



36,000

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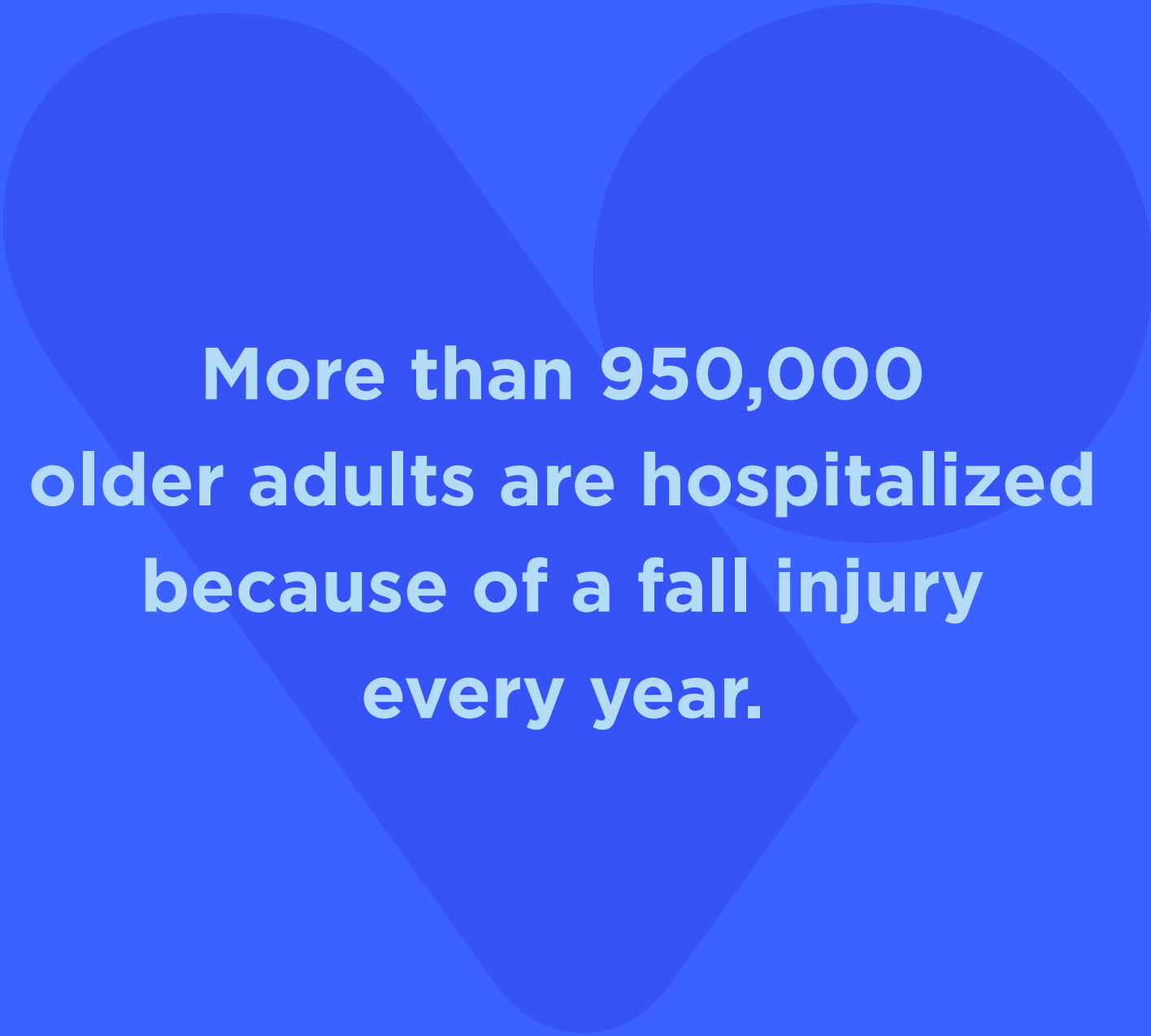
3 Million

In 2020, emergency departments recorded 3 million visits for older adult falls.

\$50 Billion

Older adult falls cost \$50 billion in medical costs annually, with 3/4 paid by Medicare and Medicaid.





**More than 950,000
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Common Injuries as We Age

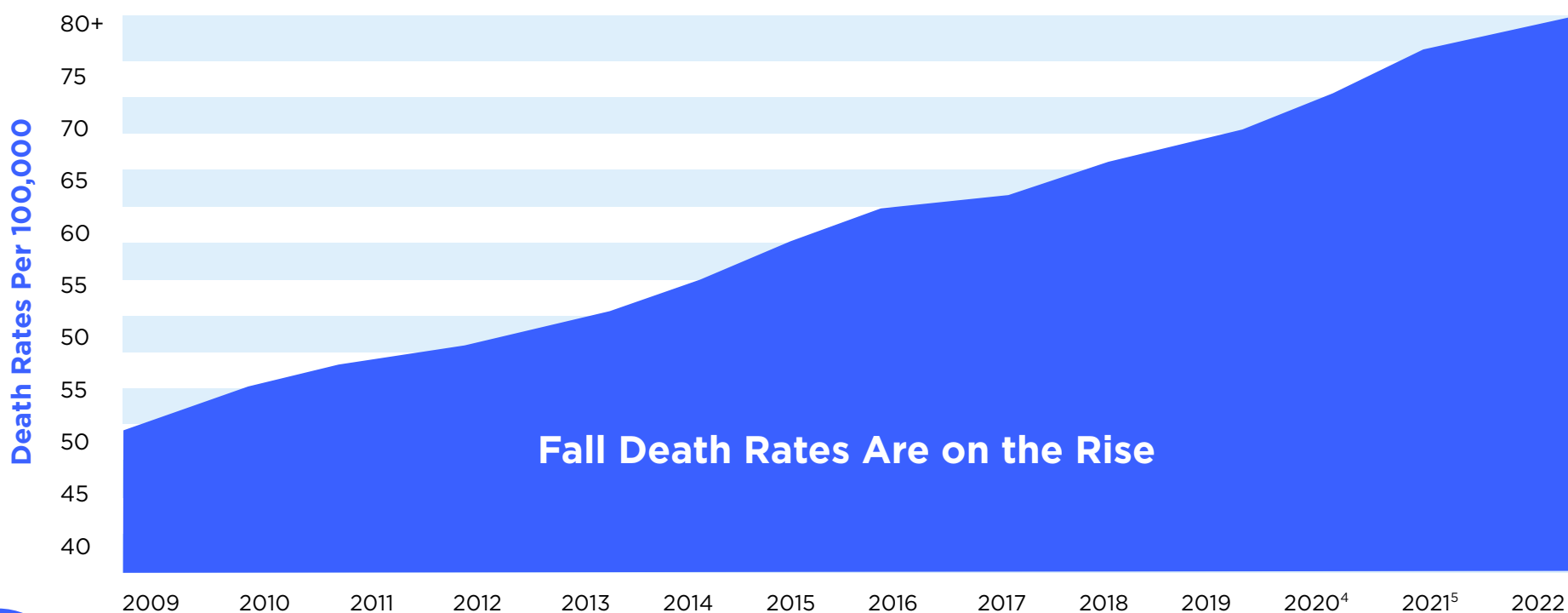
Every day, more than 10,000 in the United States turn 65. The number of injuries will increase as the population of older adults grows, and healthcare costs associated with these injuries will also increase.

Deaths from unintentional injuries are the seventh leading cause of death among older adults, and falls account

for the largest percentage of those deaths.³ Falls and motor vehicle crashes result in the majority of traumatic brain injury (TBI) hospitalizations and deaths among older adults.

Each year, 36 million falls occur among older adults aged 65 and older. One out of five falls cause serious injury, such as broken bones or head injuries.

More than 950,000 older adults are hospitalized because of a fall injury every year, most often due to a head injury or hip fracture. More than 95% of hip fractures are caused by falling, and falls are the most common cause of TBI-related deaths and hospital admissions.



Risk Factors for Falls among Seniors

Research has identified several risk factors that contribute to falls—many of which can be eliminated or lessened to help prevent falls. Some of the most prevalent risk factors include the following:

- Vision problems
- Lower body weakness
- Vitamin D deficiency
- Difficulties with walking and balance
- Foot pain or poor footwear
- Use of medicines, such as tranquilizers, sedatives, or antidepressants. Even some over-the-counter medicines can affect balance and how steady a person is on their feet.
- Home hazards such as broken or uneven steps, throw rugs, or clutter that can be tripped over⁶

Most falls are caused by a combination of **risk factors**. (see chart on page 6). The more risk factors a person has, the greater their chances of falling.⁷ All this may paint a grim picture; however, there is a reason to be optimistic: falls are preventable. They are not a normal part of aging.⁸ Healthcare providers—particularly vision care professionals—can help eliminate scores of fall risk factors, including those listed above.



Vision Care Prevents Falls and Improves Overall Health

It's estimated that as many as 80 million people living in the U.S. have potentially blinding eye diseases,⁹ and approximately one person in three has some form of vision-reducing eye disease by the age of 65.¹⁰ The most common causes of vision loss among the elderly are age-related macular degeneration, glaucoma, cataract, and diabetic retinopathy.¹¹ The causes impact millions of people in the U.S., and the harm they cause can be irreversible if not identified and treated early.

Age-Related Macular Degeneration—

Macular degeneration, often called age-related macular degeneration (AMD), is an eye disorder associated with aging that results in damaged sharp and central vision. Central vision is needed for seeing objects clearly and for common daily tasks such as reading and driving. AMD affects the macula, the central part the retina that allows the eye to see fine details. There are two forms of AMD—[wet](#) and [dry](#).

AMD is a major cause of blindness worldwide and is the leading cause of vision loss and blindness for Americans aged 65 years and older. An estimated 19.8 million (12.6%) Americans aged 40 or older are living with AMD. The number of older Americans is projected to nearly double from 48 million to 88 million by 2050.¹²

Glaucoma—Glaucoma is a group of diseases that can damage the eye's optic nerve and result in vision loss and blindness. One of the most common types of glaucoma occurs when the normal fluid pressure inside the eyes slowly rises. However, recent findings now show that glaucoma can occur with normal eye pressure. With early treatment, members can often be protected from serious vision loss.¹³

About three million people in the U.S. have glaucoma, the second leading cause of blindness worldwide. Open-angle glaucoma, the most common form, results in increased eye pressure. There are often no early symptoms, which is why 50% of people with glaucoma don't know they have the disease. There is no cure (yet) for glaucoma, but if it's caught early, vision can be preserved, and vision loss can be prevented. Taking action early is the key to preserving vision health.¹⁴

50%

of people with glaucoma don't know they have the disease.

[Learn more about AMD](#)



[Learn more about glaucoma](#)



Cataracts—A cataract is a clouding of the eye’s lens. It’s the leading cause of blindness worldwide and the leading cause of vision loss in the U.S. Cataracts can occur at any age (because of a variety of causes) and can be present at birth. Although treatment for the removal of cataracts is widely available, access barriers such as insurance coverage, treatment costs, patient choice, or lack of awareness prevent many people from receiving the proper treatment.

In the U.S., there are 24.4 million people affected by cataracts, and that number is expected to double to about 50 million by 2050, in large part because of the aging population.¹⁵

Diabetic Retinopathy—Diabetic retinopathy (DR), a common complication of diabetes, is the leading cause of blindness in American adults aged 20–74 years. It is characterized by progressive damage to the blood vessels of the retina, the light-sensitive tissue at the back of the eye that is necessary for good vision. DR usually affects both eyes.

The risks of DR are reduced through disease management that includes good control of blood sugar, blood pressure, and lipid abnormalities. Early diagnosis of DR and timely treatment reduce the risk of vision loss; however, as many as 50% of patients are not getting their eyes examined or are diagnosed too late for treatment to be effective.¹⁶

Other common eye disorders and diseases include [refractive errors](#), [amblyopia](#), and [strabismus](#).

[Learn more
about diabetic
retinopathy](#)



50%

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Preventive Measures

Falls are a serious threat to the health and quality of life of older adults, but they're not inevitable. There are many ways members can reduce their chances of falling or help a loved one prevent falls. The first logical step is to identify the risk factors, and then implement preventive measures to address them.

As mentioned earlier, risk factors for falls are numerous, but near the top of any list, you're sure to find vision problems.

Clear vision plays a crucial role in maintaining balance and spatial awareness, both of which are essential for preventing falls. Our eyes provide vital information to our brains about our surroundings, allowing us to perceive depth, judge distances, and detect potential hazards.

A comprehensive eye exam not only helps ensure members have a current prescription and proper eyewear, but it also includes patient and family health history, visual acuity measurement, preliminary tests of visual function and eye health (including depth perception, color vision, peripheral vision, and the response of the pupils to light), and more.¹⁷

Eye exams also provide an opportunity for early detection of life-altering chronic conditions; and eye care providers can provide recommendations for visual exercises, appropriate lighting, and dietary considerations.

By recognizing the significance of clear vision and incorporating it into comprehensive fall-prevention strategies, preventable injuries can be avoided, member well-being and independence are protected, and medical costs are contained or reduced.



What Can You Do to Prevent Your Loved Ones from Falling?

Speak up.

Talk openly with your loved ones and their healthcare provider(s) about fall risks and prevention.

Keep them moving.

Check with your loved one's healthcare provider to see if it's safe for them to participate in strength and balance exercises, such as Tai Chi.

Have their eyes and feet checked.

Have your loved one's eyes checked by an eye doctor at least once a year and replace eyeglasses as needed.

Have a healthcare provider check their feet once a year and discuss proper footwear.

Make their home safer.

Help your loved one get rid of trip hazards like throw rugs, and keep floors clutter-free.

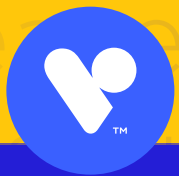
Brighten their home with extra lighting or brighter light bulbs.

Install grab bars in the bathroom(s)—next to the toilet and inside and outside of their bathtub or shower.

Install handrails on both sides of staircases.



There are 273 diseases or health conditions that can be detected through an eye exam.¹⁸



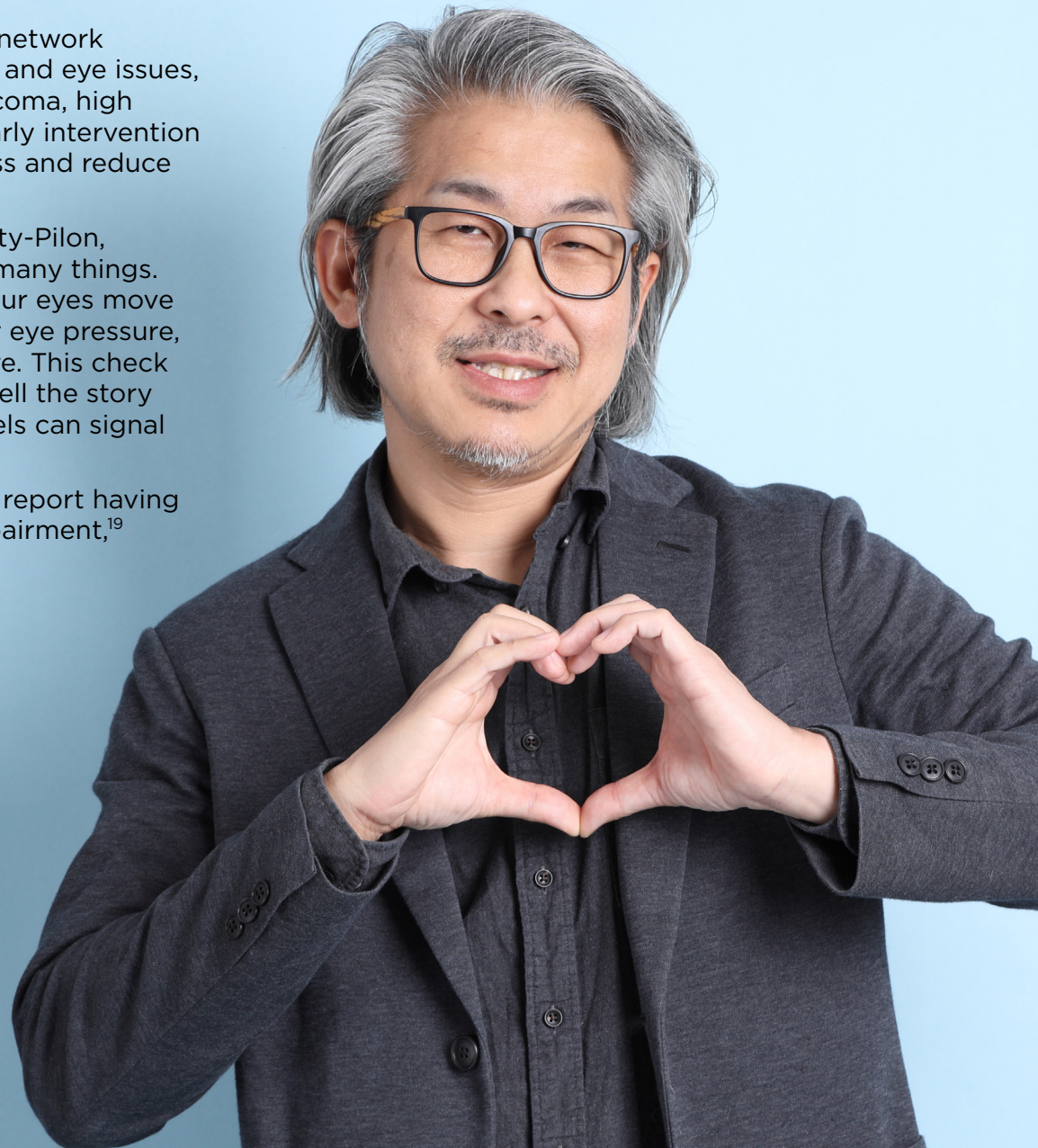
Eye Care Is Healthcare

Eye care is healthcare. A WellVision Exam® from a VSP® network doctor can help detect early signs of 273 chronic health and eye issues, including cataracts, diabetes, diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma, high cholesterol, hypertension, and macular degeneration. Early intervention and treatment of these conditions can prevent vision loss and reduce the risk of falls.

According to VSP Chief Medical Officer Dr. Valerie Sheety-Pilon, "When eye doctors perform an exam, we're evaluating many things. We're testing your near and distance vision, how well your eyes move together, and your peripheral vision. We also check your eye pressure, the surface of your eyes, and your eyes' internal structure. This check allows us a clear view of your blood vessels, which can tell the story of your overall health. Damage to the retinal blood vessels can signal harmful conditions affecting the brain, heart, and more."

In fact, people with vision impairment are more likely to report having some chronic conditions than people without vision impairment,¹⁹ such as the following:

- Hypertension
- Heart Disease
- High Cholesterol
- Stroke
- Arthritis
- Cancer
- Weak/Failing Kidneys
- Diabetes
- Hepatitis
- Depression
- Hearing Impairment
- COPD



18 Surprising Health Problems an Eye Exam Can Catch

Aneurysm

Brain tumor

**Cancers of blood,
tissue, or skin**

Diabetes

Giant cell arteritis

Heart disease

High blood pressure

High cholesterol

Lupus

Lyme disease

Multiple sclerosis

Medication toxicities

Rheumatoid arthritis

Sarcoidosis

Sickle cell disease

Stroke

Thyroid disease

Vascular disease



Conclusion

Not all falls are preventable, but neither are they inevitable. It's estimated that 20–30% of falls can be prevented by assessing risks and intervening to reduce these risks. Access to vision care is one of the most cost-effective ways to make a positive impact on the longevity, quality of life, and financial well-being of members and those who care for them.

A simple eye exam can help ensure clear vision for everyone, especially the Medicare population. But vision care is a low-cost, low-barrier entry point for seniors who may have other undetected eye and health conditions—273 of which could be identified and treated early via a simple visit to an eye care provider.

Health-Focused Vision Care

As a health-focused vision care company, VSP cares about the well-being of the communities we serve—not just through exceptional vision care and member service, but also by using vision care as a way to identify and help our members address chronic conditions that affect overall health.

VSP provides access to high-quality, affordable eye care and eyewear to help our members see well and be well. And, as the only national not-for-profit company in vision care, we reinvest our profits back into the members and communities we serve so that everyone can enjoy a lifetime of good vision.



[Learn more about VSP Vision Care.](#)



[Learn more about VSP Vision Care's Health and Government Programs.](#)



[Contact a VSP representative in your area.](#)



Sources and Additional Reading:

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