

the eyes need it

Regular exercise and good nutrition not only improve your physique, but can improve your sight, too. Here's how.

BY CLAUDIA LINH

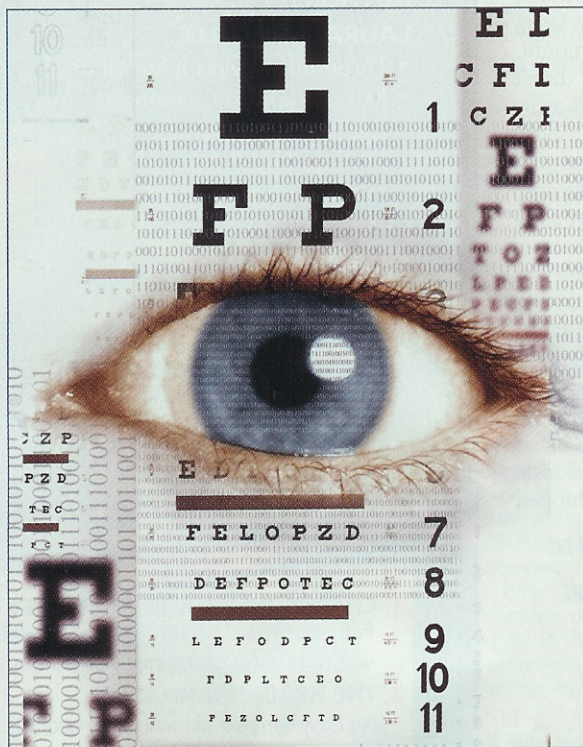
If you're dedicated to a fitness lifestyle — exercising regularly and following a healthy diet — you probably notice the smallest change in your body and its abilities, whether you can lift more weight, increase the intensity level on the elliptical trainer or even fit into your clothes better. But when it comes to your vision, changes are harder to pinpoint, even though your eyes play a crucial role every day. People generally can't measure how well they see, or how well they're using their eyes; they don't know when their eyes have changed, or if they aren't seeing their best, says Elise Brisco, OD, FAAO, optometrist at the Hollywood Vision Center in Los Angeles.

"Vision consists of two main components: seeing clearly and how the eyes work (eye muscle control and coordination)," Brisco explains. "Both are very important in your daily life, and for sports." The eyes provide information and feedback to the hands and body about placement, depth and speed, making them critical for optimal sports performance. This affects your ability to catch a ball, your timing, the speed of your visual reaction time, the way you shift your bodyweight and more.

How can we help ensure that our eyes stay healthy and continue to assist us in our quest for optimal fitness? Actually, that's easy: They respond to the same type of diet and exercise regimen we follow for the rest of our body!

Diet & Exercise for the Eye

Just as your body responds to a clean diet, your eyes benefit from



eye exercises

Keep your eyes focused throughout the exercise so that your target not only stays in sight but is clear and single the entire time. If the target appears blurry or double at any time, start the exercise over again.

CONVERGENCE: develops strength for reading and other near-the-eyes focusing tasks.

Stand or sit in a relaxed posture. Hold a pencil at arm's length away from you and focus both eyes on that pencil. Begin to slowly move the pencil toward your face, keeping your eyes fixed on it the entire way to your nose. Then, move the pencil back away from your face until it reaches the starting position. If your eyes drift off the pencil, begin the exercise over again. Repeat the exercise in its entirety five times.

ROTATIONS (tracking): develops ability to follow a target more precisely.

Stand or sit in a relaxed posture. Hold a pencil in front of you, about 1 foot away from your face. Focus both eyes on that pencil. Begin by moving the pencil to the right in an arc so that the pencil will eventually be parallel to your ear. Without moving your head, keep your eyes fixed on the pencil until it's out of your field of vision. Continue focusing on the pencil as you return it to the starting position and move it to the left side. Repeat this exercise five times for each side.

good nutrition. "[Eating] carrots and other orange- and green-colored fruits and vegetables is a great way to keep your eyes healthy," notes Brisco. Foods like yams and cantaloupe that tend to be high in beta-carotene are other beneficial additions to your diet. A well-balanced diet, including antioxidants, water and essential oils like omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids, is important for eye health as well, she says; antioxidants in particular slow the progression of certain age-related eye problems such as cataracts and macular degeneration.

Eye exercises can improve your visual skills, such as visual reaction time, tracking, and eye-hand and eye-body coordination, Brisco adds. They can also help make you more productive while reading or working on the computer — big culprits of eye strain.

Just like the rest of your body's muscles, those in your eyes need to be stretched and "fine-tuned" through eye exercises. If you use a computer or do desk work most of the day and keep your eyes focused on a set distance, Brisco recommends doing the ocular calisthenics described here daily since using your eyes at a set distance for a prolonged period fatigues the muscles and makes them "tight."

Because your eyes are so important in every aspect of your life, taking care of them should be as much a concern as caring for the rest of your body. "Your eyes change because your body changes," Brisco points out. "You should have your eyes checked annually." **B**

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