

# Canada Eyecare Report 2025

Specsavers

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# Foreword

Eye health is universal. Almost everyone will experience a vision or eye care issue during their lifetime.

According to the World Health Organization, at least 2.2 billion people worldwide have vision impairment or blindness, of which over 1 billion cases could have been prevented or have yet to be addressed.

Ageing populations, changing lifestyles, and limited access to eye care are among the main drivers of the rising numbers of people living with vision impairment, the report finds, not just in low- and middle-income countries, but high-income countries, like Canada, as well.

Canada faces challenges when it comes to access to eye health care. This new report from Specsavers sheds new light on important issues, including the barriers to routine eye exams.

At IAPB, we bring together organisations from across the global eye health sector and beyond to work towards a world where everyone has universal access to eye care. One of our key priorities is connecting knowledge, and Specsavers' Canada Eyecare Report 2025 will help connect the vision health community with valuable knowledge.

The end of avoidable sight loss is within our grasp. By sharing information and generating solutions together, we can create a world where everyone has access to the best possible standard of eye health.

Peter Holland  
CEO, IAPB (International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness)

# Introduction

Vision impairment affects millions of Canadians, with the numbers growing daily.

## We know that:

### More than eight million Canadians are at risk

of eye-threatening conditions, with blinding diseases affecting older adults (55+) at much higher rates, according to recent research from the Canadian Association of Optometrists.<sup>1</sup>

### Approximately 1.2 million Canadians

are living with vision loss currently.<sup>2</sup>

### The total annual cost

of vision loss in Canada is estimated at **\$33 billion**.<sup>2</sup>

These are the facts – but they aren't the whole picture. Why is the vision loss rate so high? What prevents Canadians from getting regular eye exams? And perhaps most importantly, how can optometrists reduce avoidable vision loss caused by undiagnosed eye disease?

To learn more about where the opportunities lie, Specsavers commissioned Angus Reid Group to conduct a national survey to measure the attitudes of Canadians towards eye exams and barriers they report when it comes to seeing an optometrist. The survey, conducted in February 2025, focused on the factors that influence compliance with Canadian evidence-based eye exam guidelines. The findings shed light on how Canadians view eye exams, their perceptions, their current behaviours, and their understanding of vision and eye health. This provides new context behind why avoidable vision loss occurs in Canada.

By exploring issues that impede access to eyecare and sharing this data, Specsavers seeks to bring together the vision health community in a shared effort to reduce avoidable blindness caused by uncorrected refractive error and undiagnosed eye disease.

“The Canadian health system is based on the principle of universal health coverage; yet, for the majority of the population, access to primary eye care services such as an eye examination and spectacles is an out-of-pocket expense. Should Canada fail to address its unmet eye health needs, citizens who are denied access to these services, either due to cost or accessibility barriers, will potentially suffer social and economic exclusion, as well as ongoing visual disability which impose resultant rehabilitation and social support costs to the economy.”

- The universal eye health imperative for Canada: an inescapable reality of unmet need<sup>3</sup>

# Methodology & Acknowledgements

The study conducted by Angus Reid Group measured attitudes and barriers to eye health among adult Canadians.

The focus was on factors that influence compliance with the recommended frequency of optometric eye exams.

The study surveyed a nationally representative sample of n=2,022 Canadian adults (age 18+ yrs.) who are members of the Angus Reid Forum.

The sample frame was balanced and weighted on age, gender, region, and education according to the latest census data. For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would yield a margin of error of +/- 2.2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

In addition to the quantitative survey, in-depth interviews were conducted with independent optometrists to add perspective to some of the findings.

Specsavers gratefully acknowledges the following individuals and organizations who contributed to our understanding of the issues explored in this report:

Angus Reid Group

Canadian Association of Optometrists

Canadian Council of the Blind

Canadian Ophthalmological Association

Diabetes Canada

Fighting Blindness Canada

Indigenous Children Eye Examination

International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness

# Vision Health Starts with Regular Eye Exams

Optometry plays an essential role in the early detection, treatment, and management of eye diseases and conditions, and provides referrals to specialists when needed.

With early detection, many eye diseases can be treated or prevented. The key: regular comprehensive eye exams.

A comprehensive eye exam uses advanced technology such as optical coherence tomography (OCT). This diagnostic technology enables optometrists to see what’s going on beneath the surface of the eye. This is important for the detection of common eye diseases that don’t cause symptoms until they have progressed quite significantly. Many people don’t realize their eye health may be changing without them experiencing any difference in their vision.

In its 2024 position statement, Canadian Association of Optometrists (CAO), the national voice of optometry, developed guidelines using the best available evidence and consultation. The guidelines remind us that “a comprehensive eye examination is the best tool for the early detection of eye disease and several systemic diseases”.<sup>4</sup>

The benefits of regular eye exams were set out by the CAO: more than 90% of vision loss in Canada can be detected early and prevented from progressing to functional vision impairment if performed according to recommended frequency guidelines, including diagnostic and imaging tools.<sup>4</sup>

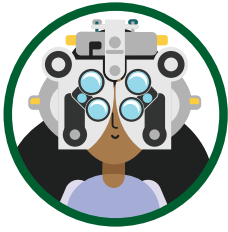
Figure 1:  
CAO Position Statement on Recommended Frequency of the Comprehensive Eye Examination<sup>6</sup>

Age Group	Comprehensive eye exam frequency for low-risk, asymptomatic individuals
Infants and Toddlers	Infants and toddlers should undergo their first eye examination between the ages of six and nine months
Preschool children (Two to five years)	At least one eye examination between the ages of two and five years
School age children (Six to 19 years)	Annually
Adults (20 to 64 years)	Every two years
Adults (64 years or older)	Annually or as recommended

The frequency of examinations for high-risk and symptomatic patients can only be determined by the treating clinician.

**VL [vision loss]** is broadly defined as a limitation in one or more functions of the eye or visual system, most commonly impairment of visual acuity (sharpness or clarity of vision), visual fields (the ability to detect objects to either side or above or below the direction in which the person is looking) and color vision.<sup>2</sup>

# 5 Key Survey Findings



## 1 One-third of Canadian adults are overdue for — or have never had — an eye exam.

One in three adults do not follow CAO eye exam guidelines, and 17% report that their last eye exam was over five years ago, or never. Getting an eye exam is symptom-driven for many Canadians. The lack of awareness of the benefits of getting a regular eye exam among a sizeable number of Canadians, contributes to a critical gap in early detection of asymptomatic and progressive ocular diseases.



## 2 Many of the people who need eyecare most are not receiving the care they need.

Children, seniors, and people living with diabetes are less likely to receive care at recommended intervals, underscoring a critical gap in preventative care delivery. Late detection places a significant burden on the health care system, our economy, individuals, and families.



## 3 Affordability is a significant barrier to care.

Cost is the single largest barrier to seeing an optometrist, with 51% of Canadians reporting this is a concern. The affordability challenge can be broken down into three categories of concern:

- Lack of extended benefits coverage for eyecare: only 57% of Canadians have extended health insurance for eyecare, and almost half (43%) say this is a barrier to getting an eye exam.
- Lack of understanding of provincial coverage: 61% of people who qualify don't think they are covered.
- Pure cost concerns combined with uncertainty about the value of seeing an optometrist.



## 4 Canadians underestimate asymptomatic eye disease, delaying essential care.

42% of Canadians state that if they had a problem with their vision, they would know it. A deeper look at the data reveals that this misconception persists even among individuals at high risk for progressive, sight-threatening conditions. Compounding this issue, 38% of Canadians report they would only seek care from an optometrist if their vision began to deteriorate, reinforcing a reactive rather than preventative approach to eye health.



## 5 Myopia is accelerating — but public awareness is not.

The survey found a sharp increase in self-reported myopia between ages 6–19 (19%) and 20–39 (43%). This may reflect a combination of late-onset myopia during adolescence, first diagnostic capture in adults, and cumulative environmental exposures such as sustained focus on close objects near work and limited outdoor time. Meanwhile, 82% of Canadians are unaware that myopia is on the rise, and just 10% understand its link to sight-threatening conditions such as myopic maculopathy or retinal detachment.

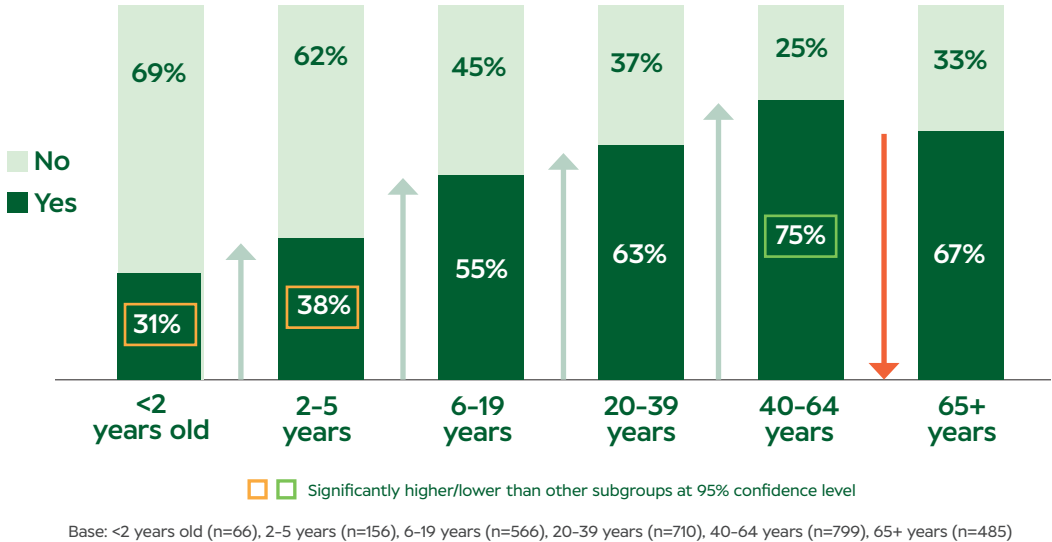
# Barriers to Care Increase Risk of Sight Loss

Compliance with eye exam frequency guidelines varies widely by age, according to the Angus Reid Group survey.

While many Canadian adults follow the CAO guidelines, children, especially younger ones, are less likely to get eye exams as recommended.

Figure 2:  
**Compliance with Eye Exam Guidelines**

angus reid group



Survey findings highlight three interconnected barriers that explain why many Canadians do not see an optometrist at the recommended frequency. Those barriers are awareness, accessibility, and affordability. Each shapes public perception and behaviour toward eyecare.

“If you’re getting an eye exam and you’re going to a clinic that doesn’t have an OCT, then I would be a little bit wary because there’s a lot of ocular disease that you need to have an OCT in order to diagnose, treat, and manage. It’s standard of care to have an OCT now to be able to manage and treat a lot of these ocular diseases. Without it, you’re not really doing your full due diligence for the patient.”

- Dr. Timothy Skwarok, Independent Optometrist



## 1

## Awareness

Canada has an eyecare awareness problem. Many Canadians are unaware of the importance of routine eye exams and the role of optometrists in preserving vision:

- The most common pervading perception revealed by the survey was that **42% agree “If I had a problem with my eyes, I’d know it”**, overlooking the fact that sight-threatening conditions can develop without symptoms and only be detected through a comprehensive eye exam.
- Awareness of advanced diagnostic tools, such as OCT, remains limited despite their growing role in early detection and patient education. Only 28% of Canadians are aware of OCT scans, according to the survey, and even fewer, 23% say they’ve had an OCT scan. It’s also telling that half of Canadians don’t know if they’ve ever had an OCT scan.
- Despite having a known need for routine eyecare, nearly one in four people (23%) with refractive error are not seeing an optometrist within recommended timeframes.

All eyecare professionals have an important role to play in solving Canada’s eyecare awareness problem. Beyond public education campaigns, there is a need to capture the hearts and minds of Canadians. This report seeks to shed light on Canadians’ behaviour, attitudes, biases, and confusion to help uncover solutions to avoidable vision loss.

“

There is clearly a significant need to educate the public about the need for regular eye examinations and their eye health in order to allow for early detection and treatment of eye diseases that may mitigate or prevent vision loss.”

- A Report Card on Vision Health in Canada 2023

## 2

## Accessibility

To what extent is difficulty accessing care resulting in overdue eye exams? The survey finds that while the majority of Canadians report being able to see an optometrist when needed, barriers remain for certain groups:

- 16% report difficulty booking an appointment, and 11% face transportation challenges.
- These concerns are likely more pronounced in rural and remote areas, as documented in external reports such as the Report Card on Vision Health 2023.<sup>6</sup> According to the report, there is widely reported maldistribution of optometrists both between and within provinces, with larger urban areas generally offering greater accessibility than rural and remote areas.
- Comfort is a barrier for some, with **25% agreeing that eye exams are uncomfortable**.

Access concerns, though not universal, require attention. Understanding which groups face the greatest barriers, whether geographic, economical, or logistical, will help the profession and policymakers address gaps in accessibility.

## Limited Access to Eye Care for Indigenous Communities in Canada

### From Indigenous Children Eye Examination

Access to comprehensive eye care remains critically inadequate for many Indigenous communities across Canada, particularly for children. Data collected from northern Ontario communities through the Indigenous Children Eye Examination (ICEE) program reveals a deeply concerning trend among Indigenous children: 49% had never received an eye exam, and 74% were found to need eyeglasses.

There are approximately 460,000 Indigenous children living both on and off reserves, many in remote regions of Canada.<sup>1,2</sup> Despite the existence of programs such as the Non-Insured Health Benefits (NIHB), the majority will never access eye care services.<sup>1</sup> In Ontario, for example, the average distance to the nearest optometrist from 33 Indigenous communities is 196 km, creating a significant geographic barrier to routine eye care.<sup>3</sup>

Multiple systemic and logistical barriers continue to restrict access to services. These include:

- Lack of awareness of available resources<sup>3</sup>.
- Cultural attitudes and historical mistrust toward the healthcare system<sup>3</sup>.
- Limited availability of local services<sup>3</sup>.
- Cost and affordability of travel and care<sup>3</sup>.

Chronic health conditions compound the issue. Diabetes is 3 to 5 times more prevalent among Indigenous populations, significantly increasing the risk of diabetic retinopathy (DR).<sup>3</sup>

Despite the clear need, one in three Indigenous people have not had an eye exam in the last two years.<sup>4</sup> This widespread lack of preventive and ongoing care highlights the urgent need for policy reform, improved funding, and culturally sensitive outreach to ensure equitable eye health for Indigenous communities across the country.

The ICEE program seeks to improve access to eye care in remote communities by developing a national outreach initiative that delivers high-quality eye care to all Indigenous children (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis) aged 0 to 18 across Canada. It also aims to serve as a conduit for connecting Indigenous communities to broader health care services.

#### References:

1. Sabri K. (2024) Sustainable Eye Care for Indigenous Children. [https://sencanada.ca/Content/Sen/Committee/441/SOCI/briefs/2024-10-25\\_SOCI\\_C-284\\_ICEE\\_e.pdf](https://sencanada.ca/Content/Sen/Committee/441/SOCI/briefs/2024-10-25_SOCI_C-284_ICEE_e.pdf)
2. Statistics Canada. Canada's Indigenous population. June 21, 2023. Accessed September 4, 2025. Available from: <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/o1/en/plus/3920-canadas-indigenous-population>
3. Kritzinger, J., Chaban, Y.V., Lichter, M., & Dimaras, H. (2024), The state of eye care and health among Indigenous Peoples in Canada. *Can J Ophthalmol*. 60 (1), 1-7. DOI: 10.1016/j.jco.2024.07.002
4. Canadian Association of Optometrists. (2018). Indigenous access to eye health and vision care in Canada: A public health imperative. [https://opto.ca/sites/default/files/resources/documents/indigenous\\_eye\\_care\\_en\\_march\\_2018\\_digital\\_0.pdf](https://opto.ca/sites/default/files/resources/documents/indigenous_eye_care_en_march_2018_digital_0.pdf)

## 3

### Affordability

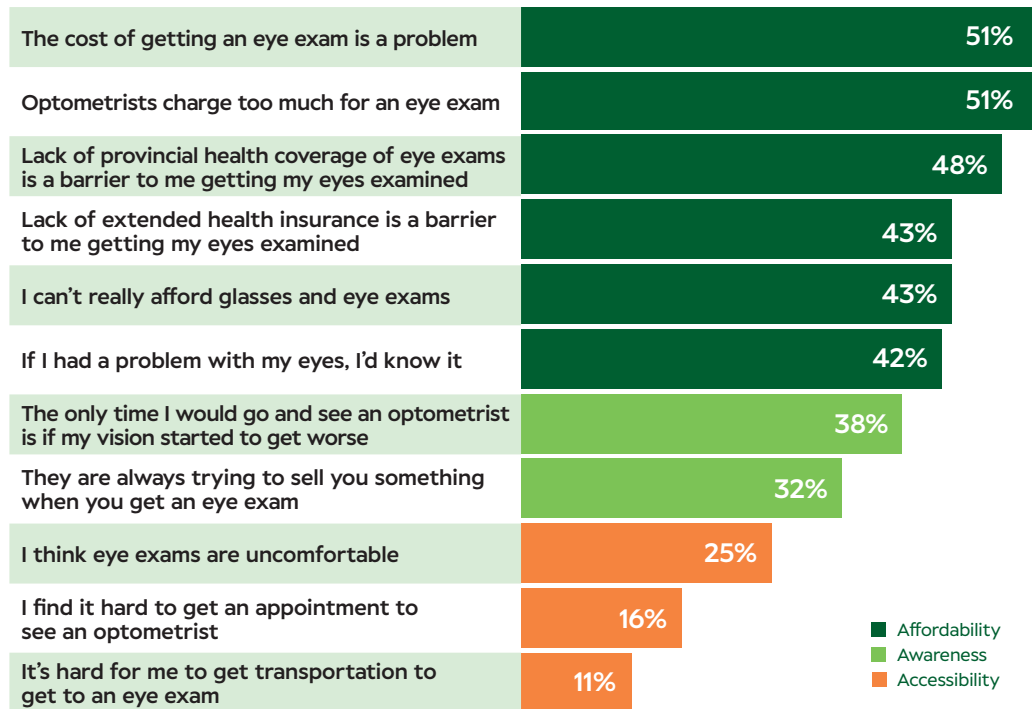
Cost is the most consistent barrier highlighted in the survey:

- **Half of Canadians (51%) report the cost of an eye exam is a problem,** and nearly as many (43%) say they cannot afford eye exams or glasses.
- Among those who feel the cost of an eye exam is a problem, a majority agree that eye exams cost too much and that a lack of health insurance is a barrier to getting their eyes examined.
- Perceptions also matter: 32% feel “optometrists are always trying to sell something,” which suggests a need to better communicate the clinical value of services.
- 48% identify lack of provincial coverage as a barrier.

Cost and a lack of health insurance are barriers to getting an eye exam. Additionally, two-in-five Canadians believe eye problems are symptomatic.

**Figure 3:**  
**Agreement with**  
**Statements**  
**Reflecting Attitudes**  
**about Eye Exams**

angus reid group



Base: Total (n=2022) | Q. Here are some statements people have made about seeing an optometrist. Please indicate if you agree or disagree, moderately or strongly.

**Figure 4:**  
**Compliance with**  
**Eye Exam Guidelines**  
**by Sub-Groups**

angus reid group

	Following Eye Exam Guidelines	Not Following Eye Exam Guidelines
Canadian Adults (TOTAL)	69%	31%
Seniors	67%	33%
Parents	71%	29%
Canadians with Refractive Error	77%	23%
Canadians with Private Insurance that Covers Eye Exams	76%	24%
Canadians without Private Insurance that Covers Eye Exams	59%	41%

### The Link Between Extended Health Insurance and Regular Eye Exams

Almost half (43%) of those surveyed identify lack of extended health insurance as a barrier to getting their eyes examined. Extended benefits drive compliance with eye exam guidelines, the survey finds. Most Canadians (57%) have extended health insurance that covers some or all the cost of eye exams. This matters: extended benefits coverage is one of the factors with most significance for compliance, according to the survey. Among Canadians with extended health insurance, 76% get regular eye exams as recommended; among those who do not have extended health insurance, compliance dips to 59%.

Extended health insurance coverage declines significantly with retirement, leaving seniors, the group at the highest rate of vision-threatening disease, with the least financial support.

“I think cost is a big issue for a lot of patients. And you know when they have insurance and they have coverage, they’re a lot more willing to come in.

- Dr. Bosung Kim, Independent Optometrist

Clear, consistent communication about costs and coverage is essential. When patients understand what is included, what is covered, and why it matters, they are more likely to remain engaged in their care.

### The Cycle

The survey suggests a reinforcing cycle: lack of awareness leads to undervaluing care, affordability concerns discourage attendance, and reduced engagement perpetuates misconceptions about optometry. Breaking this cycle requires coordinated efforts to educate, simplify access, and provide clarity on coverage and costs to ensure that no Canadian delays or forgoes care due to uncertainty or financial barriers.



# Meeting the Eyecare Challenge for Three Priority Groups

Beyond the issues of awareness, access, and affordability, the survey highlighted sobering realities for groups of people who are at elevated risk of vision threatening conditions: children, seniors, and Canadians living with diabetes.

As the CAO guidelines suggest, these are people who benefit the most from timely optometric care. Finding practical mechanisms to enhance awareness, accessibility, and affordability for these people will arguably have the largest impact on detecting avoidable sight loss, saving the economy billions, and improving the quality of life for millions of Canadians into the future.<sup>2</sup>

Small steps taken by optometrists now have potential to influence large-scale impact over time.

1

## Children – Closing the Pre-School Eyecare Gap

As reported by parents in the Angus Reid Group survey, Canadian children and teens are less likely than adults to get regular eye exams, with compliance at just 31% for children under two years, 38% for 2-5 years old and 55% for 6-19 years old.

Nationally, **one in five Canadians under the age of 20 were reported to have a refractive error**. The survey revealed prevalence rates of 14% for myopia, 8% for hyperopia, 6% for amblyopia, and 4% for strabismus.

Parents were the group of survey respondents most likely to have extended benefits covering eyecare, the survey found. This is important, given that early access to eye examinations can significantly influence lifelong visual outcomes.

### Key Insights from Survey Data

- **Half of children and teens are not receiving eye exams at recommended intervals.**  
Only 50% of all children aged 19 and under are examined at the frequency recommended by the CAO. Younger children are the least likely to be seen, even though many vision disorders are most effectively treated before the age of seven.
- **Awareness gaps persist among parents of children in pre-school years.**  
Despite CAO guidelines recommending eye exams before nine months and again between ages two and five, many parents are unaware of these timelines. This represents a missed opportunity to address developmental visual concerns early. As children get older, they are more likely to have had an eye exam. But by then, it can be too late.
- **Parents show stronger adherence when supported by benefits.**  
Parents are more likely than all other Canadians to have extended health insurance (71% vs 54%). And among parents who have extended health insurance, 78% meet exam frequency guidelines, significantly higher than those without this coverage.



- **Cost is a significant barrier for uninsured families.**

Among parents without extended health benefits, 72% identified the cost of an eye exam as a problem, compared to 44% among parents with extended health insurance. This is particularly challenging for the 55% of parents with multiple children, where costs add up quickly.

“People don’t know what optometrists do. They don’t know guidelines with kids. Just having conversations with parents is ‘oh, I didn’t know when I was supposed to bring them in’.”

- Dr. Brendon Bjarnason, Independent Optometrist

### Children with Myopia – An Urgent Priority

Myopia emerged as the most common refractive condition in children surveyed, with 14% diagnosed. Across the broader respondent pool, 46% reported having myopia themselves – an unexpectedly high self-reported rate that reflects its growing prevalence in the population. **Globally, myopia is projected to affect more than half of the world’s population by 2050.**<sup>7</sup>

Parents are more aware of myopia than non-parents, likely due to direct communication from optometrists and public health campaigns, but awareness is low for such an urgent issue.

The survey showed information on myopia (below) and asked questions about awareness:

*“New research shows the rate of nearsightedness (myopia) among children and teens worldwide has tripled over the past three decades, with a particularly steep increase noted since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.*

*A paper in the British Journal of Ophthalmology, which reviewed 276 studies published to June 2023 from around the world, concluded that more than one in three of all children and teens are nearsighted, triple what it was in 1990.”*

The responses indicate most parents do not understand that myopia is on the rise, nor do they grasp the implications. While awareness of contact lenses and glasses that slow the progression of myopia in children is slightly higher, it is just 27% among parents.

“I had a patient the other day and she asked me ‘Do you do paediatrics? Do you see kids?’ And I said ‘Yes, absolutely. We see them as early as six months’ and she was shocked... and we still have patients that come in and are always asking how old [their children] should be before they come in for their eye exams.”

- Dr. Timothy Skwarok, Independent Optometrist



Figure 5:  
**Awareness of Myopia in Children**  
 angus reid group

	Aware of increase in myopia	Aware of the link between myopia and sight-threatening conditions	Aware of contact lenses/glasses that slow the progression of myopia
Parents of children and teens under age 20	24%	12%	27%
All Canadian adults	17%	9%	16%

Specsavers Thought Leadership Study, Angus Reid Group, March 2025

“The rapid rise of myopia is a compelling wake-up call that underscores the critical need for seeing children early. It also opens the door to discussing glaucoma, cataracts, and other eye conditions that often go unnoticed.”

- Specsavers Thought Leadership Study, Angus Reid Group, March 2025

### How Optometrists Can Help

Optometrists are uniquely positioned to safeguard the visual development of Canadian children, yet research continues to find significant under-engagement in early pediatric eyecare. The clinical imperative is clear: early intervention leads to better outcomes. This must be more widely understood by parents.

- Encourage early intervention with clear messaging to parents.**  
 The survey reflects persistent confusion among parents about when their child should be first examined and by whom. This indicates an opportunity to examine how early-age thresholds are communicated and to ensure families are referred if care is not available. Early detection and management of visual conditions can dramatically alter developmental, educational, and social outcomes – parents need to know this.
- Simplify the message, clarify the cost.**  
 Half of Canadian children are not receiving eye exams at the recommended frequency – this is a problem. Large-scale public awareness campaigns remain important, but their impact depends heavily on syndication at the local level. In practice, this means taking every interaction, whether with parents, teachers, or community partners, as an opportunity to reinforce the value of comprehensive eyecare. Transparent communication around pricing, coverage, and any anticipated out-of-pocket costs is essential to drive uptake.



## 2

- **Act as community ambassadors for children's vision.**

Children live in an interconnected network of caregivers – teachers, daycare staff, family physicians, early childhood educators, and grandparents. These individuals often act as first-line observers of visual difficulties, yet many have limited understanding of what optometric care entails. Intentional relationship-building with these groups can amplify awareness and trust in optometry. Even small-scale outreach, such as offering resources to local schools or hosting brief information sessions for daycare providers, can significantly improve referral rates and help children access timely care.

- **Make myopia management accessible, consistent, and sustainable.**

Pediatric eyecare, especially myopia management, is a marathon, not a sprint. Success depends on consistency of messaging, predictable follow-up schedules, and affordability. Practical strategies include aligning sibling appointments, offering simplified follow-up structures, and maintaining fee transparency from the outset. For some practices, creating inter-optometrist referral pathways may ensure children are matched with the most appropriate provider and treatment plan for their needs. The goal is to ensure no child is left behind – both in identifying myopia early and in maintaining engagement throughout their eyecare journey.

## Seniors – The Growing Need in an Aging Canada

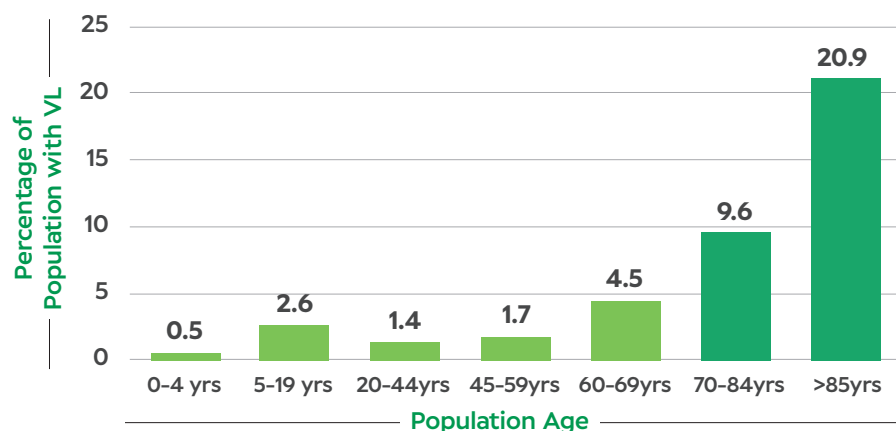
The Canadian population is aging rapidly. As of July 1, 2023, approximately 7.6 million Canadians were aged 65 years and older, accounting for 18.9% of the total population.<sup>9</sup> By 2030, this proportion is projected to rise between 21.4% to 23.4%, underscoring the long-term implications for health service delivery, including optometric care.<sup>8</sup>

This demographic reality is reflected in the Angus Reid Group survey data: 25% of respondents identified as seniors, mirroring the broader aging trend.

Seniors face a substantially higher risk of vision loss. **Canadians aged 75-85 are about five times more likely to experience visual impairment** compared to those aged 45-54.<sup>9</sup> This aligns with CAO's position that population aging is the single greatest factor driving the increase in vision loss in Canada.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 6:  
Prevalence of VL  
in Canada by Age**

Reproduced from: Canadian Council of the Blind. The cost of vision loss and blindness in Canada: Final report. Fighting Blindness Canada; 2021. Available from: [https://www.fightingblindness.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CCB\\_Cost-of-VI-in-Canada\\_Final-Report\\_04052021.pdf](https://www.fightingblindness.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CCB_Cost-of-VI-in-Canada_Final-Report_04052021.pdf)





The most prevalent eye diseases leading to vision loss, including age-related macular degeneration (AMD), glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, and cataract, are highly age dependent.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, as Canada's senior population grows, a parallel increase in vision loss prevalence is expected.<sup>11</sup>

Coverage remains a structural barrier to care. While some provinces provide routine eye exam coverage for asymptomatic seniors, others such as Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador, offer none.<sup>12</sup> In jurisdictions where coverage exists, co-payments or partial reimbursement can still create unexpected out-of-pocket costs.<sup>12</sup> Previous national data show that over half (53%) of seniors report lacking extended benefits for eyecare or eyewear.<sup>13</sup>

## Key Insights from Survey Data

- **Seniors are less likely than other at-risk groups to attend eye exams at the recommended frequency.**

One-third (33%) of seniors do not follow standard CAO guidelines, which recommend an annual eye exam for adults over the age of 65.

- **Extended health insurance coverage matters.**

Extended health benefits coverage is lowest among seniors: only 45% of seniors reported having extended health benefits for eye exams (vs. 61% of non-seniors). Those with extended health coverage were significantly more likely to adhere to recommended frequencies than seniors without extended health coverage (73% vs. 62%) and less likely to perceive exam costs as a problem (27% vs. 37%).

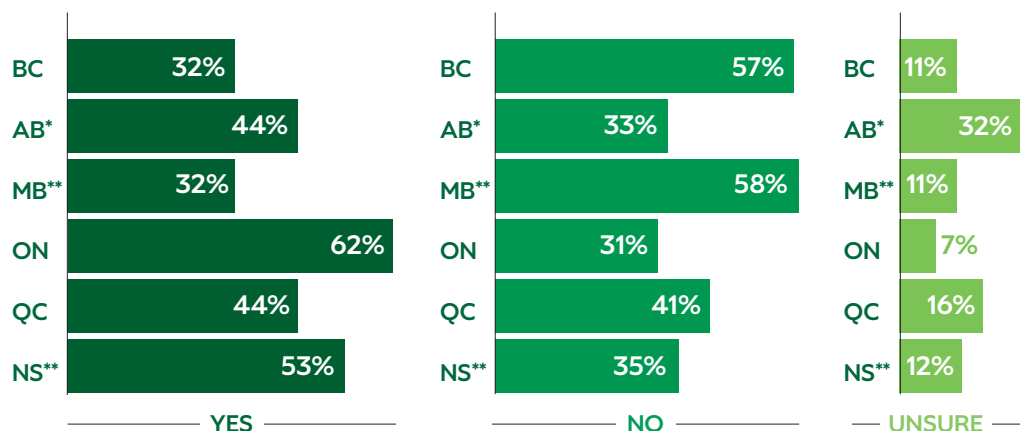
- **Awareness of provincial coverage is low.**

Despite routine eye exams being covered for eligible seniors under some provincial healthcare plans, only 47% report they have this coverage, and 12% are unsure. Looking at the six provinces where this coverage is currently available, awareness is less than 50% in most of those provinces. Ontario is highest at 62%, but that still leaves four in ten seniors unaware they are covered by provincial insurance. This gap in awareness points to a significant communication breakdown between policy and public understanding that may cause some seniors to miss essential annual exams.

**Figure 7:**  
**Awareness of Provincial Coverage Among Seniors**

(In provinces where the cost of eye exams is covered for seniors)

angus reid group



\*Caution: Low base size (n<50), interpret result with caution \*\*Caution: Extremely low base size (n<30), interpret result with caution



## How Optometrists Can Help

- **Explain the importance of annual eye exams.**

Evidence continues to support recommending yearly eye exams for adults over 65, given the increased prevalence of glaucoma, cataracts, AMD, and other conditions that affect eyes.<sup>2</sup> The CAO guidelines align with other international best practices in this regard.<sup>4,14</sup> For this age group, clear communication is important as often the health status of their eyes is more complex. Simple explanations of their vision, prescription, and risk for progression of eye conditions all help to build trust and understanding of why they should be assessed yearly.

- **Provide timely appointment reminders.**

Optometrists are in a great position to provide comfort and practical instructions to seniors and encourage them to return. A robust recall system that provides appointment reminders and clearly explains the importance of the next exam can help encourage compliance with eye exam guidelines.

- **Help seniors understand cost and their coverage.**

As seniors transition out of employer-sponsored health benefits, many report confusion about what is provincially covered versus what requires out-of-pocket payment.<sup>5</sup> Inconsistent coverage across provinces and co-payments in some further complicates decision-making.<sup>12</sup> There is an opportunity for optometrists to make the cost of eye exams and what is (or isn't) covered explicitly clear at the time of booking and throughout the clinical visit.

## 3

### Adults with Diabetes – Preserving Vision in a High-Risk Population

Diabetes is a significant and growing public health challenge in Canada.<sup>15</sup> In this survey, 10% of respondents self-identified as living with diabetes, closely matching the national prevalence.

More than 1.8 million people in Canada are living with diabetes in 2025 and do not even know it, according to Diabetes Canada.<sup>16</sup> All of them are at risk for vision-threatening diabetic retinopathy (DR), whether or not they are aware of their condition.<sup>17</sup> Certain groups, including Indigenous, African, Arab, Asian, Hispanic, and South Asian Canadians, face higher risk of type 2 diabetes and its complications.<sup>16</sup>

**People with diabetes are 25 times more likely to experience vision loss,** with DR alone costing the Canadian economy an estimated \$250 million in 2020.<sup>18</sup> Early detection through comprehensive eye exams including OCT is critical, as DR can progress without symptoms until significant, sometimes irreversible, damage occurs.<sup>18,19</sup>

While the risk of diabetes increases with age, many people with the condition are of working age,<sup>20</sup> so consistent, convenient, accessible eyecare is of vital importance to mitigate vision impairment in this high-risk category.

## Key Insights from Survey Data

- **Eye exam frequency is low.**

2 in 5 Canadians living with diabetes are not obtaining annual eye exams as recommended by Diabetes Canada's clinical practice guidelines. This is concerning given the asymptomatic nature of early DR and the accelerated risk of vision loss.

- **Insurance influences behaviour and perceptions.**

52% of people living with diabetes report having extended health insurance. Even among this group, only 61% have seen an optometrist in the past 12 months. Those with extended health insurance covering eyecare are less likely to perceive cost as a barrier (36% vs. 46%).

- **Provincial coverage is not well understood.**

People in Canada living with diabetes are covered for annual eye exams in all provinces except New Brunswick and Newfoundland. But more than half of people with diabetes (53%) either do not know they have provincial coverage or believe they do not.

- **Misconceptions about symptoms persist.**

Almost half of people with diabetes (47%) report that if they had a problem with their vision, they would know it. 29% say the only time they would see an optometrist is if their vision started to get worse. This persistent belief that eye conditions will always cause noticeable symptoms is something that is likely to influence them to defer care or deprioritize it. This suggests a gap in education for people living with diabetes and caregivers, particularly around the silent progression of DR.

- **Barriers beyond cost exist.**

18% of Canadians living with diabetes report difficulty accessing an eye exam, suggesting transportation, scheduling, or system-navigation issues.

## Why is Sight Loss Prevention Important to Diabetes Canada?

### From Diabetes Canada "Diabetes and Sight Loss Prevention: A Position Statement"

Diabetes represents one of the greatest public health and health systems challenges in Canada. Diabetes decreases quality and length of life, and is the leading cause of sight loss in this country. Among the numerous diabetes complications, blindness due to diabetic retinopathy (DR) imposes an enormous burden on public health and has significant clinical implications. Even though substantial progress has been made in understanding the etiology of the disease and increasing access to new screening and treatment modalities,

DR remains the most common cause of blindness among working-aged adults, placing an enormous impact on society and the economy. Further, in parallel with the increasing prevalence of diabetes and the aging population in Canada, the burden of sight loss attributable to DR is substantial and growing.

The development and progression of sight loss due to DR can be altered by addressing modifiable risk factors, early detection through recommended screening guidelines, and appropriate cost-effective management and treatment. This policy position presents the disease and economic burden of sight loss due to DR, as well as prevention interventions that can be administered by public health, primary health-care systems, and health-care providers.



## How Optometrists Can Help

- **Make OCT a standard for diabetic eyecare.**

DR can progress with microscopic changes invisible to traditional funduscopy. OCT allows optometrists to detect retinal changes at their earliest stages, sometimes years before symptoms appear. For patients with diabetes, the power of OCT in encouraging routine assessment is key. By normalizing OCT use, optometrists ensure early intervention becomes the standard, not the exception. As telehealth and AI-assisted screening solutions emerge, optometrists have an opportunity to proactively lead in adopting OCT technology as standard so that care does not become commoditized and compromised. Optometric care for people living with diabetes needs to be comprehensive and holistic in nature.

- **Lead the conversation on prevention.**

Nearly half of people with diabetes believe vision problems would be noticeable. This misconception can delay care until vision loss is advanced. Optometrists can counter this by showing patients images of their retina, explaining how damage can occur without symptoms, and framing each exam as protecting and preserving their vision, rather than just correcting vision. It can also be valuable to develop an understanding of their overall health circumstances and the challenges unique to people living with diabetes.

- **Be explicit about coverage and costs.**

Many people living with diabetes are still unclear on the scope of their provincial coverage or the role of extended health insurance in funding diabetic eyecare. At booking and during the exam, optometrists can outline exactly what is covered and any additional costs. Positioning coverage as a resource they should use every year can alleviate concerns about cost and encourage consistent follow-up.

- **Integrate care with the patient's health network.**

Communicating findings to the patient's family physician or endocrinologist strengthens continuity of care and reinforces the medical importance of optometric exams. Even minor changes, such as early macular thickening, should be shared promptly. This not only benefits the patient's health outcomes but also positions optometry as an indispensable and reliable member of the diabetes care team. Finding ways to automate and regulate this communication is key and has significant benefits in inter-professional relationship building.

- **Implement robust recall systems.**

People with diabetes often juggle multiple medical appointments. A strong appointment reminder system, with effective contact points and clear explanations of why the next exam matters, helps maintain adherence. Messaging should clearly explain the difference between services that address eyesight changes, such as updated glasses prescriptions, and those that monitor and prevent eye disease, so patients understand the medical importance of regular eye exams, even if they feel their vision has not changed.

# Collaboration & Research

A large ecosystem of research groups, health care professionals, and support groups play a pivotal role in detection and ongoing management of sight-threatening eye conditions.

Optometrists are well placed to open lines of communication to drive a culture of routine eye exams and preventative care. This requires strong processes and systems for communication that leave no one out of the loop.

## Collaboration with those who support Canadians with vision loss

Among the many contributors to this report are support groups such as the Canadian Council of the Blind and Fighting Blindness Canada that provide patients and their caregivers with the information and resources they need, between medical visits and along their journey. Optometrists have limited time windows to convey vital information and reinforce clinical guidance, so implementing systems and processes that direct patients to the right place for information and support is an area that could have huge impact on compliance and preventative care.

## The Voice of the Blind in Canada From the Canadian Council of the Blind

Through advocacy, collaboration, and prevention, the Canadian Council of the Blind (CCB) fosters independence, inclusion, and improved quality of life for those living with vision loss or blindness.

Supporting people with vision loss is critical. Vision loss can lead to isolation, unemployment, and reduced access to healthcare and education. By offering peer support networks, technology training, and public awareness campaigns, the CCB helps individuals regain confidence, navigate daily life, and participate fully in society.

Still, there is an urgent need for a comprehensive national eye care strategy. Over 1.5 million Canadians live with vision loss, yet access to eye health services remains inconsistent across provinces. A coordinated strategy would ensure timely eye examinations, equitable treatment, and better integration of vision care into the broader healthcare system. It would also support research and innovation, helping to reduce preventable blindness and improve outcomes for those affected.

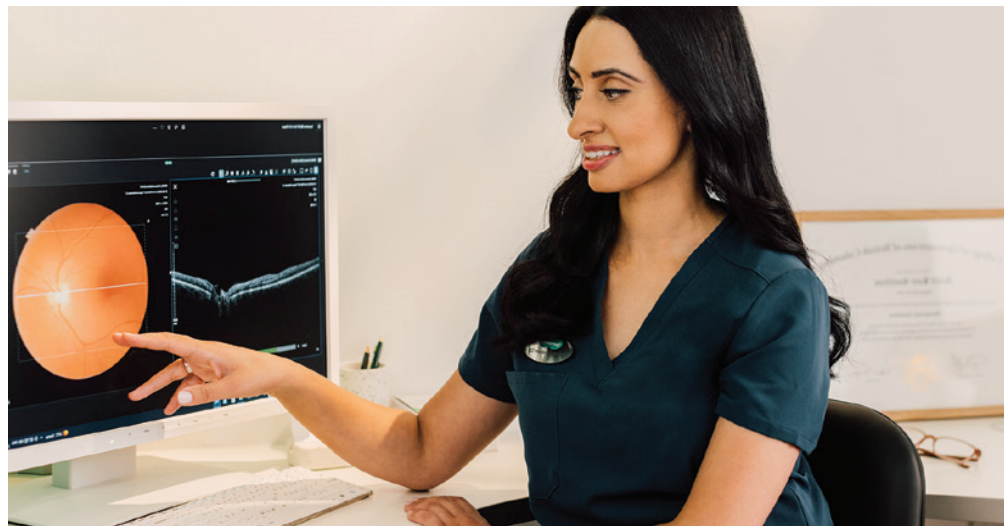
The CCB emphasizes both the human and systemic dimensions of vision loss. Our work not only uplifts individuals but also calls attention to the broader need for national leadership in eye care.



## Research

Research into the causes, prevention and treatment of vision loss is leading to innovative advances in eyecare. From retinal regeneration to contact lenses that control myopia to novel treatments for AMD, researchers across Canada are exploring new ways to improve eye health. Many of these developments will ultimately land in the hands of optometrists to improve outcomes for patients.

For 50 years, Fighting Blindness Canada (FBC) has been championing vision research, funding groundbreaking studies, and helping to grow Canada's research community. Many of past grant winners have gone on to become world-renowned leaders in fields like inherited retinal disease, gene therapy, and stem cell research.



## Advancing Hope Through Research

From Fighting Blindness Canada

At Fighting Blindness Canada, we believe that research is the foundation for preserving and restoring sight. Every breakthrough in early detection or treatment begins with research, and continued investment in this work brings us closer to preventing blindness and improving quality of life for millions of Canadians. While research unlocks critical possibilities for preventing vision loss, it can only be truly impactful when people have access to timely diagnosis, preventative eye care, and treatment.

This new report highlights a troubling reality, that too many Canadians are overdue for or have never had an eye exam. Too many assume they will 'know' if

something is wrong. In fact, vision loss from many of the most serious eye diseases—including glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, and age-related macular degeneration—can develop without early warning signs. By the time vision loss is noticed, it may be too late to reverse.

Eye exams are a crucial first step in detecting and treating sight-threatening conditions early. For children, regular exams can identify issues that impact learning and development. For seniors and adults, they are vital in preventing avoidable vision loss. Yet barriers like affordability and lack of awareness mean that those who need care the most often receive it the least.

Research and regular eye exams together form the frontline of vision health. By advancing knowledge and ensuring equitable access to care, we can move toward a future where fewer Canadians lose sight to preventable causes.

# A National Eye Care Strategy for Canada

A group of not-for-profit organizations, Canada's Vision Health Partners, is supporting the establishment of a National Vision Health Desk and a National Eye Care Strategy.

This follows the passing of Bill C-284, the National Strategy for Eye Care Act in November 2024. The legislation provides a framework to develop a national strategy to improve eyecare and rehabilitation services, invest in research, increase accessibility, and promote eye health education. The goal: ensuring all Canadians have access to essential eye health services.

This collaboration in support of a National Eye Care Strategy is an important initiative that has the potential to make important advances in eyecare in Canada.

# Seeing the Way Forward

The Canada Eyecare Report 2025 is written as plans for a National Eye Care Strategy take shape and key voices in the industry provide a clear pathway forward to achieve the objective of improving access to eyecare.

This report seeks to bring visibility to crucial issues around eye health and preventing avoidable blindness.

There is much more work to be done, more perspectives to understand, and insight to be drawn from optometrists, ophthalmologists, support groups, and the Canadian public. Optometrists have a huge opportunity to transform perceptions and engagement with optometry through what they do, and how they do it, everyday... and this is just the beginning.



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Specsavers is an optometrist-owned business that offers eyecare and eyewear at locations across Canada. As part of Specsavers' commitment to accessible eyecare, Specsavers equips every location with optical coherence tomography (OCT) technology, which helps optometrists to detect sight-threatening conditions, such as age-related macular degeneration, glaucoma, and diabetic eye disease, in their earliest stages.

Founded in the UK over 40 years ago by optometrist husband-and-wife team, Doug and Mary Perkins, there are now more than 2,700 Specsavers healthcare businesses globally, serving over 44 million patients and customers. Specsavers is driven by its purpose of "changing lives through better sight" and aims to transform the way Canadians experience eyecare by offering exceptional service, advanced clinical equipment, and quality eyewear.

For more information, please visit [specsavers.ca](https://www.specsavers.ca)

**Specsavers' purpose is to "Change lives through better sight". In Canada, our goal is to reduce avoidable blindness caused by undiagnosed eye disease. We seek to achieve this by helping to ensure that every Canadian sees their optometrist within two years by improving awareness, access, and affordability of eyecare.**

The Specsavers logo, consisting of the word "Specsavers" in white sans-serif font inside a dark green rounded rectangle with a white outline.

**Specsavers**