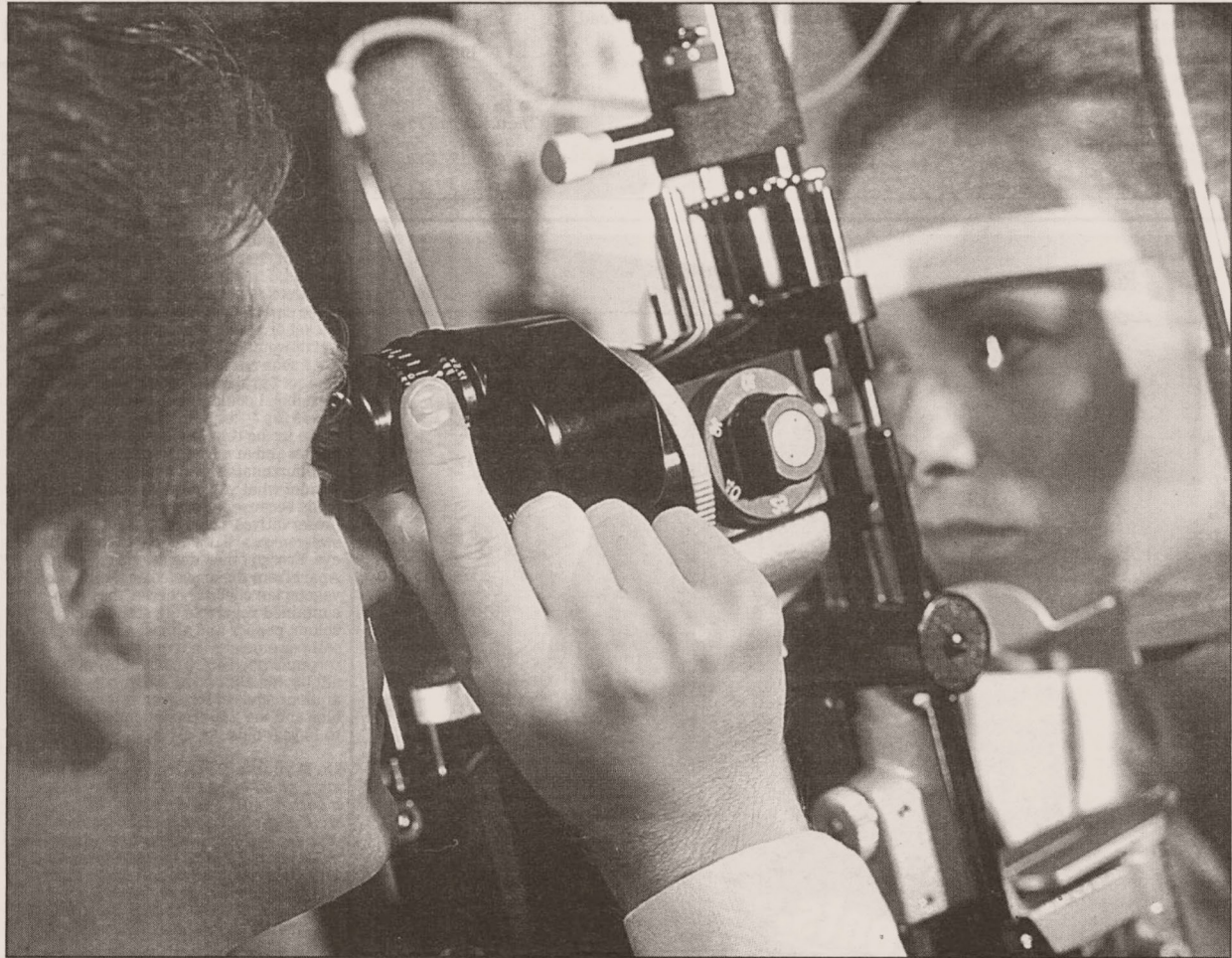




Half of us don't have our eyes tested as often as we should – and one in 10 never bothers at all. But an optician can diagnose many problems, from diabetes and high blood pressure to multiple sclerosis. LIZ HOLLIS meets those who got to the optician just in time

Picture: THE TELEGRAPH COLOUR LIBRARY



A SIMPLE eye test not only provides you with the glasses you may need, it could also save your life. Opticians can detect diseases such as high blood pressure, multiple sclerosis, glaucoma and even a brain tumour before you have even noticed any symptoms.

Yet research released to mark National Eye Week, shows that since free eye tests for all were abolished in 1989, half of us are leaving it longer than the recommended two years between tests and 10 per cent have not had a test since they were at school.

"It concerns me that there are people walking around with potentially dangerous illnesses going undetected," says Rosie Gavzey, chairman of the Association of Optometrists.

"A lot of illnesses don't involve any pain or symptoms and people are not aware anything is wrong. A couple of weeks ago I saw a 42-year-old man who had blurred vision in one eye. It turned out he had really bad diabetes.

"People seem to think they are omnipotent and nothing will happen to them or their eyes until their late 40s. It's simply not true."

Many diseases leave a hallmark sign in the inner workings of the eye which only a trained optician or optometrist can spot. High blood pressure leads to flame-shaped marks, and kidney and liver failure trigger swelling in the retina.

Opticians can detect high blood cholesterol, which shows up as a white banding on the cornea, the membrane that covers the eyeball. Diabetes shows up as crystals in the lens of the eye.

They can also spot diseases of the eye such as glaucoma, which if left untreated can lead to blindness. Usually, sufferers are unaware that they have this condition — which is triggered by pressure in the eye and leads to damage of the optic nerve — because it has no symptoms. If caught early, it can be easily

treated with eye drops, but leave it too late and you lose your sight.

Optician Ted Arbuthnot, from Barry, South Glamorgan, says: "People assume that they need to visit an optician only when something goes wrong with their sight. But regular eye checks are vital for your general health, not just your eyesight.

"In many cases, spotting a disease this early can make treatment easier and may even save your life. I see several patients a week who have high blood pressure but have no idea they are at risk of a stroke until I spot the warning signs when I examine their eyes. An eye test is about

much more than just acquiring a new pair of glasses or contact lenses. Now, even doctors are referring patients to the optician because we have specialised equipment that can spot diseases."

'My eye test revealed I could be paralysed at any moment'

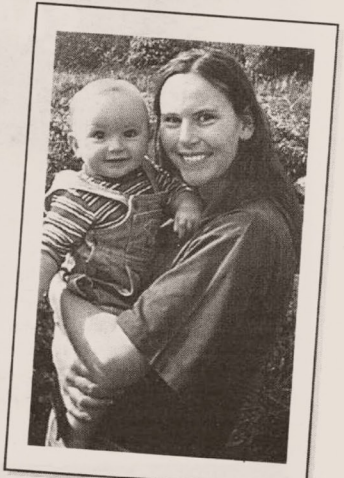
Accountant Emma Bates, who had not had her eyes tested for 10 years, went to the optician for a check-up. "I assumed I would be leaving with a pair of glasses. Instead, I went straight to accident and emergency at the nearest hospital," says Emma, 37. "The test revealed that my blood pressure was so high I could suffer a stroke or paralysis

at any moment.

"I went to the optician because my eyes began to feel more tired and dry than usual. I had also started squinting while I watched television and thought I probably needed glasses. I knew I was a bit short-sighted, but I hadn't had my eyes checked for 10 years.

The optician noticed that the tiny blood vessels at the back of Emma's eye were haemorrhaging, a sign of high blood pressure that needed emergency hospital treatment.

Emma — who lives in Essex with husband Bill and 14-month-son



JUST IN TIME: Emma, pictured with Christopher, was sent to hospital

Could your optician save your life?

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I went for glasses

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Christopher — was shocked and frightened by the unexpected diagnosis. She had no idea that there was anything wrong with her health.

Emma had felt tired for a few months but assumed it was because she was working hard. She thought only elderly people suffered from high blood pressure. “Later that afternoon I saw a consultant at the hospital. After more tests I was given tablets to control my blood pressure. If I hadn’t gone to the optician that

day, at best I could have lost my sight and at worst I might have had a stroke and been paralysed or even died.

“I’m better now, but I still have to take medication every day to control my blood pressure. I’m just so thankful that I thought to have a routine check-up that day.”

‘I had a tumour’

Vicar David Foster, 44, from High Wycombe, Bucks, went to the optician for a check-up after his daughter Naomi broke his glasses. He had not been for three years. “If I

hadn’t booked to get some new glasses, I might not be alive today,” he says. “The optician told me I had gone blind in my left eye — but I hadn’t even noticed because my other eye had been compensating for the loss of sight.”

Three months later, hospital tests revealed David had a tumour on his pituitary gland. “It is usually the size of a peanut, but mine had grown to golf-ball size and was pressing on my optic nerve, which is why I was losing my sight. I was so shocked, because I had no symptoms and no hint