

Wellness Routine: Cancer Found During Annual Eye Exam

Have you ever gone to a doctor for a routine visit, only to have it suddenly turn anything but? There's the concerned wrinkle in the forehead, the closer look and the pause. Well, imagine having an annual eye exam, where you were just going in to get new reading glasses, end up saving your life.

That's what happened to a 53-year-old attorney sitting in the exam chair of Art Corish, O.D. We'll call the patient "Hal." He wanted nothing more that day than his annual exam and a new prescription to sharpen up his close-vision. What he got: a shock, and then a life-saving referral. Dr. Corish remembers the day well.

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“During a comprehensive eye exam, we routinely look inside a patient's eyes for signs of any changes,” he says. “In Hal's case, when I dilated his eyes and examined them, I saw an unusual growth in the back of the eye – something that hadn't been there in earlier exams,” he said.

After an appointment with a retinal specialist, who was equally concerned, Hal found himself at the eye clinic of a major Irvine, Calif. university. They made the diagnosis: a rare malignant melanoma, right there in Hal's eye.

You've probably heard the term, “malignant melanoma” – anything with “malignant” in it is scary. Well, melanomas are a form of cancer, often life-threatening, usually found on the skin. But, hardly ever does one find its way to an eye. Fact is, only 6 people in a million get it. Standard cancer protocol applies – get the tumor out, or it's going to grow and do a lot more damage, up to and including loss of life. In Hal's case, it could have meant loss of his eye or additional spreading.

But because Hal went in for that routine eye exam, none of those things happened. Right on the heels of the early diagnosis came state-of-the-art radiation treatment. It got rid of the tumor and the threat it posed.

Hal's story is a prime example of why you need to get your annual eye exam – even if you don't notice vision changes.

Says Dr. Corish, “There are dozens of conditions patients won't notice themselves until the diseases are quite advanced. Glaucoma, hypertension, diabetes and tumors are just a few of the many diseases we look for when examining patients at their regular check-ups.”

Surprised? Don't be. Eyes are a unique view into overall health. And VSP eye doctors take their time and explore that view with care.

As for Hal, maybe he considers his eye doctor a hero. But, for Dr. Corish, it was all in a routine day's work.