

Visual health not yet taken seriously among Canadians

*New study reveals that 41% of Canadians do not understand well the risks to their visual health –
Too few adopting proper prevention and consultation behaviours*

Montreal, QC, September 14, 2017—There is still much work to be done to help Canadians understand visual health risks and the importance of prevention, before consequences become irreversible. These are the findings of a discussion paper on Canadians and the risks to their visual health, published by Essilor Canada. Based on an omnibus survey conducted by Ipsos among 1,200 Canadians and the comments of two experts in optometry, this document provides a summary of their knowledge and understanding of the risks to Canadian's visual health and their behaviours when confronted with visual health issues. It also offers recommendations for Canadians to actively manage their visual health, as well as suggestions for all stakeholders in the eyecare industry to improve education and prevention. The discussion paper can be consulted and downloaded at bit.ly/2xSonGf.

Generational Differences in Knowledge, Understanding and Attitudes Towards Risk Factors

While 41% of Canadians surveyed acknowledge they have a limited understanding of the risks to their visual health, there are discrepancies between generations. For example, a greater proportion of Millennials (aged 18 to 34) reported having a good knowledge of risk (65%) compared to the older generations (57% for 35–54 year-olds and 58% for those aged 55 and over).

The survey also measured the importance Canadians place in several external and behavioural risks factors. According to them, the two biggest external risk factors for visual health are exposure to UV rays on sunny or summer days and exposure to artificial UV radiation. These are considered very important for 65% and 63% of Canadians, respectively, compared to exposure to UV rays on overcast, rainy or winter days (39%), exposure to digital screens (35%) and exposure to artificial light sources (26%).

For respectively 66% and 55% of respondents, having uncorrected vision problems (such as blurry vision, nearsightedness or farsightedness) and driving while exposed to the blinding reflections of the sun are the most important behavioural risk factors, followed by wearing uncomfortable eyeglasses with twisted or misadjusted frames, or scratched lenses or inappropriate lenses impairing vision (44%), driving at night while exposed to blinding lights such as car headlights or traffic lights (40%), doing prolonged or meticulous tasks (34%), and working or engaging in activities at night or in the dark (31%).

Here again, generational differences are reflected in the emphasis on external and behavioural risk factors. Canadians over the age of 35 seem to be more aware of the risks associated with exposure to UV rays on sunny days than Millennials: 66% of those aged 35–54 and 74% of those aged 55 and over consider this risk very high, compared with only 55% for 18–34 year-olds. Conversely, younger generations are more aware of the risks associated with exposure to digital screens, while only 29% of Canadians over 55 consider this risk problematic (36% of 18–34 year-olds and 40% of 35–54 year-olds).

“Many baby boomers have seen a vision loss in their parents, and certainly remember how it has made them very dependent and has seriously affected their quality of life,” says Dr. Diana Monea, optometrist based in Calgary (Alberta). “As they grow older, they understand that eye diseases like cataracts or age-related macular degeneration can happen to them, with serious consequences if they do not protect their visual health.”

As they are exposed to digital screens as part of their work and everyday life¹, Canadians aged 18 to 54 seem increasingly concerned about overexposure to harmful blue light². “We need to wait for longitudinal studies to see if excessive blue light exposure actually causes damage to retinal cells but recent studies are showing that visual performance and visual comfort increase while wearing lenses that selectively filter high energy blue light far better than non-selective yellow filters,” explains Dr. Jack DiBerardino, optometrist based in Orangeville (Ontario).

¹ 30% of adults spend over 9 hours a day using digital devices. Vision Council 2015 Digital Eye Strain report

² Blue light is both helpful and harmful, as it's at the limit between visible and invisible light. Blue-turquoise light is necessary for our visual acuity and well-being, while blue-violet light is harmful, since it penetrates our eye and may damage the retina.

Visual Health, a Precious but Misunderstood Capital

If Canadians rightly recognize natural and artificial UV rays as the main external risk factor, Dr. DiBerardino is surprised that these figures are not higher: “Despite the many media campaigns over the last few decades on this issue, 35% and 37% of the population, respectively, are still unaware of these risks... That’s a lot. I think Canadians understand well the harmfulness of UV rays to their skin through sunburns or, more seriously, melanomas, but they do not make a connection with the risks to their eyes.”

The study also sheds light on visual health issues faced by Canadians and their attitudes towards these: 85% of Canadians have experienced visual health problems in the past 12 months through itchy, teary or dry eyes (56%), eye strain (55%), difficulty seeing objects that are far (39%) or near (37%), and double vision (12%).

It appears in the study that Canadians are most sensitive to visual risks that cause pain or discomfort, but those are not necessarily the most dangerous for the eye. Indeed, there is a notable difference between the symptoms, their intensity and the risks. A lot of people are not aware of the silent risks, risks like UV overexposure which do not present painful symptoms, but can pose serious long-term threats.

On the other hand, while 85% of Canadians have experienced visual health issues in the past 12 months, only 57% have consulted an eyecare professional. Among the main reasons given for not consulting an optometrist, minimal discomfort and financial considerations (budget, insurance coverage) are the most frequent. These justifications are of particular concern to the eyecare experts, who see this as a lack of education on the part of Canadians about the importance of preserving their visual health, which cannot be improved over the course of their lives. “Many people take their visual health for granted until they are affected by a serious problem,” says Dr. Monea. “The pain, continuous aggravation, or blurry vision, will then lead people to consult as an emergency. Unfortunately, it might be too late and the damage is sometimes irreversible.”

Visual Health, a Secondary Priority Among Other Health Issues in Canada

Canadians often see the preservation of their visual health as a secondary priority, especially among younger generations, who are the most likely to have failed to consult an eyecare professional after experiencing a visual health issue: “The question of non-consultation of an eyecare professional is the result of the emphasis placed on visual health in relation to other health or well-being issues, such as dental or aesthetic care,” explains Dr. DiBerardino. “Visual health is clearly in the background among younger generations, with social acceptance deemed more important. People aged 55 and over are certainly the most health conscious and they devote more resources, time and money to this.”

However, all eyecare experts are unanimous about the need to better prevent visual health risks before problems arise and to encourage regular eye examinations, especially for children, for whom vision is the main learning vector. “We know that 80% of classroom learning is visual, yet only 15% of children have a comprehensive eye examination before starting school. We also know that as much as 25% of all school-age children have an undiagnosed vision or health problem. This potentially leaves many kids at a disadvantage when it comes to school and learning performance.”

If Canadians are entitled to expect more from governments in terms of eyecare coverage, the eyecare experts believe that industry stakeholders should work together to develop concerted actions to raise awareness of the importance of eye health, and to educate Canadians on the way to prevent eye diseases, as well as correct and protect their vision.

Solutions can also be found in better collaboration with other healthcare professionals, particularly family doctors, who are often Canadians’ primary healthcare contact.

About Essilor Canada

Because Canadians have visual needs that impact their lives, and because we care about their vision, Essilor Canada’s mission is to *Improve Lives by Improving Sight*. It translates into everything we do: our products, services, technologies, trainings, philanthropic initiatives, as well as in our involvement in health, environment and safety.

Present in Canada since 1972, Essilor is proud to contribute to the growth of our country’s economy with over 1000 employees, 3 digital surfacing laboratories and 40 regional and partner laboratories. Essilor Canada is a subsidiary of Essilor International, the world leader in ophthalmic optical products that invests heavily in research

and development to create new products always better adapted to the needs of wearers. Essilor creates, manufactures and personalizes a wide range of corrective lenses and coatings that are distributed through eyecare professionals and help prevent visual health issues, correct and protect vision. Canadians can entrust their vision to Essilor brands such as Varilux[®], Eyezen[™], Crizal[®], Xperio[®] and Transitions[®].

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