

Information for Patients

Non Arteritic Ischemic Optic Neuropathy (NAAION)

Your doctor suspects that you have suffered an episode of non arteritic anterior ischemic optic neuropathy (NAAION). This is a common cause of sudden decreased vision in patients over the age of 50.

What is NAAION?

NAAION is a disorder in which the vessels (arteries) supplying blood to the optic nerves become blocked. The optic nerves leave the back of the eye to carry information from our eyes to our brain. The loss of blood supply deprives the optic nerve of oxygen and results in damage to all or part of the nerve.

The loss of blood supply is a small stroke in the optic nerve but unlike other strokes caused by a loss of blood supply there is no weakness, numbness or loss of speech.

The loss of blood supply results in swelling of the optic disc often associated with bleeding (the optic disc is the part of the optic nerve that can be visualised at the back of your eye). Once the bleeding and swelling settles the disc becomes pale and shrunken. These changes can be seen by your eye doctor when they examine your eye.

What causes NAAION?

The cause of NAAION is not completely understood but it is known to happen more often in patients who are born with small optic discs. These episodes may also occur when there is a sudden drop in blood pressure associated with blood loss following an accident or surgery. There is also a greater risk in patients who smoke, have diabetes or high blood pressure.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Most patients with NAAION notice a sudden disturbance in their vision. Vision may become blurred, dimmer or darker often above or below what is being looked at. Central vision remains normal. There should be no discomfort, pain or change in the appearance of your eye. The eye doctor will notice a swelling in the back of your eye which will go away over a period of weeks to months.

As this condition is sometimes associated with temporal arteritis (inflammation involving the arteries that supply the eye) it is very important that you tell the eye doctor if you have had tenderness in your temples, pain when chewing food or scalp tenderness when brushing your hair. It is important for the doctor to make sure that you don't have this condition.

Is there any treatment?

Unfortunately there is no treatment for this condition. It has been suggested that a 75mg Aspirin tablet taken daily may reduce the risk of an episode occurring in the other eye. Patients suffering with high or low blood pressure should ensure they receive regular checks at their GP surgery as good control of the condition is important. Your blood pressure will normally be checked, as will the health of your unaffected eye. Blood tests may also be taken. Stopping smoking is strongly recommended.

Will my vision improve?

Most patients with NAAION will have stable vision and a recent study suggests that 40% of patients may expect to have some improvement in their central vision.

The visual field defect (difficulty seeing above or below) is not likely to improve. It may become less noticeable with time especially if the other eye has normal sight. A small number of patients may have worsening of their vision and there is approximately a 20% chance of this happening in the other eye.

Because each patient is different, the information contained in this leaflet is a general guide only. Please contact your GP if you require any further advice.

