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Recession Cutting Into Doctor Visits, According to New Consumer Survey

American Eye-Q® survey shows some consumers cut primary care and dental visits before other health appointments

Portland, OR, Sept. 29, 2009 – While the economy begins to show signs of a slow recovery, many consumers continue to struggle with financial challenges, some of which could affect their health. A survey released today by the American Optometric Association (AOA) revealed that 36 percent of Americans say they are limiting their doctor visits because of the recession.

When asked which doctors they are visiting less, the majority indicated dentist (63 percent), followed by primary care physician (59 percent) and eye doctor (52 percent). Only eight percent indicated that they are sticking to their regular health schedule.

“These statistics are very worrisome,” said Dr. Jim Hale, optometric physician and member of the Oregon Optometric Physicians Association, the AOA’s local chapter. “We know that many eye and vision problems have no obvious signs or symptoms, so early diagnosis and treatment are critical.”

While the survey did not ask why respondents chose to make specific cutbacks in doctor visits, fear of losing eyesight is likely part of the answer. For the fourth year in a row, the AOA’s American Eye-Q® survey showed that consumers worry most about losing their vision (43 percent), over their memory (32 percent) or even their ability to walk (12 percent).

“The concept of losing vision appears very concrete to people, which may be why people cut back on other doctor visits first,” said Dr. Hale. “But optometric physicians encourage individuals to consider eye and vision care as an integral part of their overall health, so cutting back on any aspect of health care is not a good idea.”

Demographics

Ethnicity

According to the 2009 Eye-Q® survey, when it comes to sticking to a regular health schedule during tough financial times, Hispanics are affected the most by the economy. Almost half (49 percent) indicated they are visiting doctors less often, compared with African Americans (36 percent) and Caucasians (33 percent).

The survey showed that 63 percent of Hispanics are limiting dentist visits, and 53 percent are cutting back on eye doctor appointments. “Since Hispanics are at a greater risk for developing eye diseases such as glaucoma, it’s important for them to see an eye doctor regularly,” said Dr. Hale. “Glaucoma cannot be prevented, but if diagnosed and treated early, it can be controlled to prevent or slow continued vision loss.”

Gender

More women (38 percent) than men (32 percent) said they are limiting doctor visits. In terms of specific doctors, women (53 percent) are more inclined to cut back on seeing an eye doctor than men (51 percent), which is unfortunate since the survey also indicated more women (52 percent)



wear glasses or contact lenses, than men (48 percent). Women also tend to be more frequent sufferers of dry eye.

Geography

Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of survey respondents living in rural areas said they have cut visits to their eye doctor. Only 50 percent of urban and suburban respondents said they are changing their regular eye-care schedule.

Dr. Hale adds that putting off routine check-ups and early stage treatments ultimately can be more expensive, and lead to additional health problems.

Help is available

The AOA and OOPA have established several programs to help consumers:

- The Oregon Foundation for Vision Awareness is a non-profit charity that helps ensure Oregon's children and underprivileged receive the eye care they need. www.ofva.org.
- Volunteers In Service In Our Nation (VISION USA) provides free basic eye health and vision services to working low-income, uninsured individuals and their families by participating AOA or OOPA member optometric physicians who donate their services. 1-800-766-4466.
- InfantSEE® is a no-cost public health program in which optometric physicians provide a one-time, comprehensive eye assessment to infants between six and 12 months of age, regardless of a parent's ability to pay. www.InfantSEE.org or call toll-free 1-888-396-EYES (3937).

About the survey:

The fourth annual American Eye-Q® survey was created and commissioned in conjunction with Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates (PSB). From May 21 – 24, 2009, using an online methodology, PSB interviewed 1,000 Americans 18 years and older who embodied a nationally representative sample of U.S. general population. (Margin of error at 95 percent confidence level.)

About the American Optometric Association (AOA):

The American Optometric Association represents approximately 36,000 doctors of optometry, optometry students and paraoptometric assistants and technicians. Optometrists serve patients in nearly 6,500 communities across the country, and in 3,500 of those communities are the only eye doctors. Doctors of optometry provide two-thirds of all primary eye care in the United States. For more information, visit www.aoa.org.

About the Oregon Optometric Physicians Association (OOPA)

The Oregon Optometric Physicians Association is a statewide organization comprised of optometric physicians, college of optometry faculty, optometric students and industry-related associates. It advocates advancing the quality, availability and accessibility of eye, vision and related health care. It also works to represent the profession of optometry, to enhance and promote the independent and ethical decision making of its members, and to assist optometric physicians in practicing the highest standards of patient care. Based in Milwaukie, Oregon, the OOPA has nearly 400 members. For more information, visit www.oregonoptometry.org.

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