

Hydroxychloroquine and Your Eyes

Patient information leaflet

Why you have been referred for eye screening

Hydroxychloroquine — you may know it as Plaquenil — is an effective and generally very safe medicine. In a small number of people taking it for a long time, it can affect the retina, the light-sensitive layer at the back of the eye.

The important point is this: the early changes cause **no symptoms at all**, and once sight has been lost it does not come back. Screening exists to find the change before you could possibly notice it, at the stage where stopping the drug prevents any further damage. That is the entire purpose of these appointments.

When screening is done

- A baseline examination soon after you start the medicine, to record how your retina looks now.
- Yearly screening after that. Where there are no particular risk factors, this may be deferred for the first five years — your rheumatologist and I will agree the schedule between us.

What raises the risk

- A daily dose above about 5 mg for every kilogram of your body weight
- Taking the medicine for more than five years
- Reduced kidney function
- Taking tamoxifen
- Any pre-existing disease of the retina or macula

What the screening involves

Two scans do most of the work: an **OCT**, a cross-section through the macula, and **fundus autofluorescence**, a photograph that shows cells under stress before any change is visible otherwise. A **visual field test** is used to confirm a finding rather than to look for one. None of this involves an injection and none of it is uncomfortable.

This follows the current recommendations of the American Academy of Ophthalmology, revised in 2025. If you have been screened elsewhere with visual fields alone, that is why the tests may look different here.

Please do not stop the medicine on your own

- If a change is found, I will write to the doctor who prescribes it for you, with the images.
- Whether to continue, reduce or stop is a decision for that doctor together with you — it depends on what the medicine is treating and what the alternatives are.
- Stopping suddenly can allow the condition it controls to flare.

Tell me if you notice

- Difficulty reading, with letters or parts of words seeming to disappear
- A change in how colours look
- Needing more light than you used to
- Anything missing from your central vision

These would be late symptoms, which is precisely what the screening is designed to prevent. Do not wait for them as a reason to attend.

A copy of your results goes to your rheumatologist after each visit, so that your care stays joined up.

Reviewed by Dr. Aysun Yucel Gencoglu, MD, FEBO, FICO. Further patient information on retinal conditions is published by the American Society of Retina Specialists at asrs.org/patients.

Notes for you from today's consultation
