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Basics of Visual Optics

(As per the Revised B Optom Course Curriculum)

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Foreword
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Contents

SECTION I: Foundations of Visual Optics

1. **Vision** **3**
   - Attributes of Vision *6*
   - Limits to Human Vision *9*
2. **Geometric Optics of the Eye** **14**
   - Optical Components of the Eye *15*
   - Cardinal Points of the Eye *16*
   - The Eye's Aperture: The Pupil *18*
3. **The Schematic Eye** **21**
   - Assumptions of the Schematic Eye Model *21*
   - Purpose of Schematic Eye Model *22*
   - Schematic Eye—Models *23*
   - Gullstrand's Schematic Eye *23*
   - The Reduced Eye *27*
4. **The Eye as an Imaging System** **31**
   - Key Optical Components of the Eye *32*
   - Key Optical Processes *33*
   - Comparison to Artificial Imaging Systems *34*
5. **Optical Constants of the Eye** **36**
   - Anatomical Constants *36*
   - Physiological Constants *37*
   - Optical Constants *38*
   - Measurement Methods *38*
6. **Axes and Angles of the Eye** **41**
   - Axes of the Eye *41*
   - Angles of the Eye *44*
   - Clinical Importance *46*

SECTION II: Ocular Optics and Focusing Mechanisms

7. Accommodation and Presbyopia 51
- Theories of Accommodation *52*
- Anatomy Involved in Accommodation *53*
- Stimulus to Accommodation *55*
- Accommodative Response *55*
- Oscillations in Accommodation *56*
- Changes During Accommodation *56*
- Neural Control of Accommodation *57*
- Aging Changes in Accommodation *58*
- Accommodation and Emmetropia *58*
- Accommodation and Ametropia *59*
- Presbyopia *61*

8. Convergence 66
- Measurement of Convergence *66*
- Geometry of Convergence *68*
- Mechanism of Convergence *68*
- Types of Convergence *69*
- Convergence and Vergence in Visual Optics *70*
- Convergence and Refraction *70*
- Convergence in Presbyopia *71*

9. Emmetropia and Ametropia 73
- Emmetropia *73*
- Ametropia *74*
- Far Point *74*
- Significance of the Far Point *75*
- Understanding the Optical Mechanism *75*
- Refractive Errors *76*

10. Astigmatism 82
- Causes of Astigmatism *82*
- Symptoms of Astigmatism *83*
- Types of Astigmatism *83*
- Correction of Astigmatism *84*
- Image Formation by Cylinder Lens *85*
- Image Formation By Sphero-cylinder Lens *87*

11. Anisometropia and Aniseikonia 91
- Aetiology of Anisometropia *91*
- Vision in Anisometropia *92*
- Classification of Anisometropia *93*
- Symptoms of Anisometropia *94*
- Aniseikonia *94*

SECTION III: Refractive Correction and Applied Optics

12. Correction of Refractive Errors 101
- Correction of Refractive Error *102*
- Modes of Refractive Error Correction *103*
- Types of Refractive Surgery *104*

13. Spectacle Optics 108
- Lens Power *109*
- Lens Forms *111*
- Radius of Curvature *111*
- Base Curve *112*
- Lens Thickness *113*
- Lens Reflection *114*
- Surface Reflectance *114*
- Surface Height *115*
- Optical Center *115*
- Prismatic Effect *116*
- Decentration *116*
- Optical Aberrations *117*
- Lens Material *117*
- Refractive Index of Lens Material *118*
- Abbe Value *118*
- Tinted Lenses *118*
- Bifocal Lens Optics *119*
- Progressive Addition Lenses *120*
- Regressive Lenses *121*
- Anti-fatigue Lenses *122*
- Myopia Control Lenses *122*
- Lens Coatings *123*
- Lenticular Lenses *125*

- Spectacle Frame *125*
- Frame Fitting Considerations *126*
- Fitting Cross *128*
- Spectacle Magnification *128*

14. Contact Lens Optics 131
- Eye and Contact Lenses *131*
- Correction of Ametropia *133*
- Contact Lens Power *134*
- Design of Contact Lenses *135*
- Sagittal Height *138*
- Vertex Distance in Contact Lens *139*
- Tear Lens in Contact Lens Optics *139*
- Mobility of Contact Lens *140*
- Lens Flexure *140*
- Contact Lens Material *141*
- Index of Refraction and Hydration Effects *141*
- Residual Astigmatism in Contact Lens *142*
- Accommodation in Contact Lens Wear *142*

15. Low Vision Aids Optics.....146
- Enlarging Retinal Image *146*
- Optimizing Illumination *149*
- Enhancing Contrast *151*
- Optical Devices for Low Vision *152*
- Field Enhancement Devices *155*

16. Magnification 158
- Types of Magnification *158*
- Clinical Implications of Magnification *161*

SECTION IV: Visual Function and Quality of Vision

17. Contrast Sensitivity.....167
- Contrast Sensitivity and Visual Acuity *167*
- Factors Affecting Contrast Sensitivity *169*
- Difference Between Contrast Sensitivity Test and Visual Acuity Test *170*
- Measuring Contrast Sensitivity *171*

18. Color Vision 174
- Theories of Color Vision *174*
- Mechanism of Color Perception *176*
- Factors Affecting Color Vision *178*
- Color Vision Defects *180*
- Color Vision Tests *181*

19. Depth Perception 186
- Mechanism of Depth Perception *186*
- Conditions Affecting Depth Perception *188*
- Binocular Depth Cues *188*
- Monocular Depth Cues *189*
- Role of Accommodation and Convergence *190*

20. Field of Vision 192
- Anatomical and Physiological Basis *194*
- Measuring the Field of Vision *195*
- Factors Affecting the Field of Vision *195*

SECTION V: Advanced Ocular Optics

21. Wavefront Optics and Aberrations 201
- Applications of Wavefront Optics *202*
- Zernike Polynomials *202*
- Types of Optical Aberrations *206*
- Measurement of Wavefront Aberrations *207*

22. Retinal Image 210
- Formation of Retinal Image *210*
- Step-by-step Process of Retinal Image Formation *211*
- Factors Affecting Retinal Image Quality *211*
- Retinal Image Size *212*
- Retinal Image Characteristics *213*
- Methods for Measuring Retinal Image Quality *213*

23. Entoptic Phenomenon 219
- Clinical Relevance *219*
- Common Types of Entoptic Phenomena *220*
- After Image *226*
- Clinical and Practical Importance of Afterimage *228*

SECTION VI: Light, Perception and Psychophysics

24. Radiometry and Photometry 233
- Radiometry *233*
- Key Radiometric Units *233*
- Photometry *234*
- Key Photometric Units *235*
- Radiometry Vs. Photometry *236*
- Application of Radiometry and Photometry in Understanding Visual Responses *236*

25. Visual Adaptation 240
- Light Adaptation *240*
- Dark Adaptation *241*
- Color Adaptation *242*
- Neural Adaptation in Vision *244*
- Factors Influencing Visual Adaptation *245*
- Clinical Applications of Visual Adaptation *246*

26. Visual Psychophysics 249
- Thresholds in Vision *249*
- Sensitivity and Adaptation *250*
- Contrast Sensitivity *251*
- Relation between Visual Acuity and Contrast Sensitivity *251*
- Methods to Quantify the Relationship between Physical Stimuli and Visual Perception *252*

Appendix *255*

Bibliography *257*

Index *259*

I Section

Foundations of Visual Optics

Section Outline

1. Vision
2. Geometric Optics of the Eye
3. The Schematic Eye
4. The Eye as an Imaging System
5. Optical Constants of the Eye
6. Axes and Angles of the Eye

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1 Chapter

Vision

INTRODUCTION

Vision, in terms of eyesight, is the ability of the eye to detect light, form images, and relay them as neural signals to the brain, where they are interpreted into meaningful perception. It is a highly complex and coordinated process in which the eyes capture visual information and brain decodes, analyses and integrates it—allowing us to understand and interact with the world around us. Good vision is essential for daily activities such as reading, driving, and recognizing faces.

Vision is one of the most complex and vital senses, enabling humans to perceive and interpret the world around them. It involves a series of intricate processes, beginning with the capture of light by the eyes and culminating in the brain's interpretation of visual information. The field of visual optics plays a crucial role in understanding how the eye processes light and forms images. Vision is influenced by multiple factors, including optics, neural processing, environmental conditions, and perceptual interpretation. The foundation of visual processing consists of three sequential elements as shown in **Figure 1.1**.

Image Formation

The human eye functions like a natural optical system, using its components to bend (refract) light and form a clear image on the retina. The process involves the following key steps:

- Light rays from an object enter the eye through the cornea, which provides the majority of the eye's refractive power.
- The aqueous humor helps in light transmission and minor refraction.
- The crystalline lens adjusts its shape to fine-tune focus, a process called accommodation.
- The ciliary muscles control the lens curvature—thicker for near objects, thinner for distant objects.

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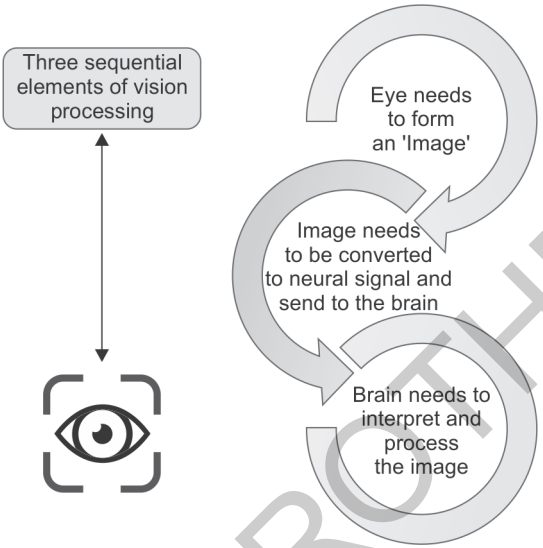

Fig. 1.1: Vision unfolds in three powerful steps: Capturing light, converting it to neural signals, and decoding it into meaning.

- The iris adjusts the pupil size to control the amount of light entering the eye.
- A smaller pupil improves focus and depth of field, while a larger pupil allows more light in dim conditions.
- The refracted light converges to form an inverted and real image on the retina. The vitreous humor helps maintain the eye's shape and ensures proper light transmission.

Conversion to Neural Signal

Once an image is formed on the retina, it must be converted into neural signals and transmitted to the brain for visual perception. This process involves the following key steps:

- The retina contains photoreceptor cells—rods and cones.
- These photoreceptors contain light-sensitive pigments (rhodopsin in rods, photopsins in cones) that absorb light and trigger a chemical reaction.
- This reaction leads to the hyperpolarization of photoreceptor cells, reducing neurotransmitter release and initiating a neural signal.
- The photoreceptor signals are processed by bipolar cells and then relayed to ganglion cells, which generate action potentials.

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- Horizontal and amacrine cells refine the signals, enhancing contrast and edge detection.
- The ganglion cells' axons converge at the optic disc to form the optic nerve.
- The optic nerve carries the visual signals from each eye toward the brain.
- At the optic chiasm, fibers from the nasal half of each retina cross to the opposite side, ensuring that:
  - The left visual field is processed in the right hemisphere.
  - The right visual field is processed in the left hemisphere.
- The signals travel through the optic tract to the lateral geniculate nucleus (LGN) of the thalamus, which acts as a relay center.

Interpretation and Perception

Once the retina converts light into neural signals and transmits them via the optic nerve, the brain must process and interpret these signals to create meaningful visual perception. This involves multiple steps.

- The LGN in the thalamus acts as a relay station, organizing and refining visual signals before sending them to the visual cortex.
- It helps in contrast enhancement and color processing.
- The signals reach the primary visual cortex (V1) in the occipital lobe, where basic features like edges, orientation, contrast, motion, depth are detected.
- Information is sent to specialized areas for higher-order interpretation:
  - V2, V3, V4 (temporal lobe)—process colors, shapes, and object recognition.
  - V5/MT (parietal lobe)—detects motion and spatial awareness.
- The inferotemporal cortex helps recognize faces, objects, and scenes.
- The parietal cortex processes spatial relationships and guides movement.
- The prefrontal cortex integrates visual data with memory and decision-making.
- The brain combines visual information with past experiences, memory, and attention to create a coherent perception.
- Other sensory inputs (e.g., touch, sound) may influence visual interpretation.

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ATTRIBUTES OF VISION

Vision is a complex and dynamic process that allows us to perceive, interpret, and respond to our surroundings. The visual system comprises intricate physiological, neurological, and psychological processes that contribute to our understanding of the world. Understanding the attributes of vision is fundamental in the study of visual optics, as it allows practitioners to identify visual deficiencies and design effective corrective measures. The primary attributes of vision are shown in the **Figure 1.2**, each of which plays a unique role in shaping our visual experience.

In addition to the primary attributes mentioned above, several other key attributes also play a significant role in shaping vision. These include peripheral vision, binocular vision, light adaptation, eye coordination, and accommodation. Each of these factors contributes substantially to the overall visual experience and functional efficiency of the visual system.

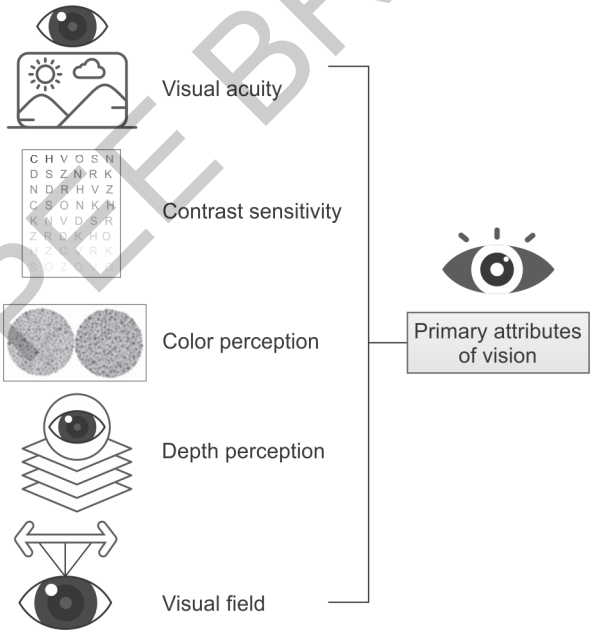

Fig. 1.2: Primary attributes of vision: The fundamental qualities that shape how we see the world.

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Visual Acuity

Visual acuity refers to the eye's ability to resolve fine details. It is a crucial measure of visual performance and is referred for central vision. It denotes the clarity or sharpness of vision, usually measured by the Snellen chart or other test chart in a clinical set up on a particular date and time.

Contrast Sensitivity

Contrast sensitivity is the ability to detect differences between light and dark areas. It helps in low-light conditions or distinguishing objects against a similar background. It evaluates vision in real-world conditions such as fog, low lighting, or glare. By assessing the visual system's ability to distinguish objects with low contrast, it becomes crucial for tasks like night driving or navigating dimly lit environments. This measurement is particularly useful for detecting early signs of conditions like cataracts, glaucoma, or macular degeneration. Unlike standard visual acuity tests, it reveals visual impairments that may otherwise go unnoticed, providing a valuable measure of overall visual quality rather than just sharpness.

Color Perception

The ability to distinguish different colors, which depends on the function of cone cells in the retina. Color perception is the eye's ability to detect, differentiate, and interpret various wavelengths of light as distinct colors. It plays a vital role in object recognition, depth perception, and visual clarity. The human eye is most sensitive to *green–yellow* wavelengths, followed by red and blue, with sensitivity varying under different lighting conditions. Accurate color perception is particularly important in professions such as aviation, maritime, electrical work, and health care, where precise color recognition is critical for safety and performance.

Depth Perception

The ability to perceive the relative distance of objects in three dimensions. This helps in activities like driving, catching a ball, or climbing stairs. Depth perception is the ability to judge object distance and perceive the three-dimensional structure of the visual environment. It relies on the brain's interpretation of visual cues from both binocular and monocular vision. Effective depth perception requires coordinated

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eye movement, proper retinal image alignment, and efficient brain processing. Impaired binocular vision, such as in strabismus or amblyopia, can reduce depth perception, while conditions like cataracts, optic nerve damage, or brain injury may also affect depth judgment. Depth perception is crucial for daily tasks like driving, sports, and navigating stairs, as well as for professions demanding precise distance judgment, such as piloting, surgery, and machine operation.

Visual Field

The total area a person can see without moving their eyes, which is important for awareness and navigation. Visual field of an individual refers to the whole area that is seen while looking straight ahead when the eyes, head and body are still. The peripheral visual field is the outer edges of the field. Normal monocular visual extends up to 60° nasally, 50° superiorly, 70° inferiorly and 90° temporarily. The binocular visual field is the superimposition of the two monocular fields.

The following are the other attributes of vision:

Peripheral Vision

The ability to see objects outside the direct line of sight, crucial for spatial awareness and detecting motion.

Binocular Vision

The ability of both eyes to work together to create a single, coordinated image, improving depth perception and reducing eye strain.

Light Adaptation

The eye's ability to adjust to different lighting conditions, from bright sunlight to dim environments.

Eye Coordination

The smooth and synchronized movement of both eyes, which is essential for tracking moving objects and focusing efficiently.

Accommodation

The ability of the eye to change focus between near and distant objects by adjusting the lens shape.

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LIMITS TO HUMAN VISION

Increasing human vision has certain limits. While advancements in science and technology can enhance visual capabilities to some extent, there are inherent constraints. The maximum achievable visual acuity is around 20/10 in individuals with exceptional eyesight. This limit is defined by the spacing of cone cells in the fovea. The human eye can only perceive wavelengths between 400–700 nm (visible light spectrum). Infrared or ultraviolet vision would require artificial enhancements or genetic modification. The brain's ability to process visual information is optimized for the current input range. Overloading it with excessive detail may hinder perception rather than improve it. There are fundamental limits to human vision and these can be studied under the different groups:

- Optical limits to vision
- Limits imposed by photoreceptor cells
- Neural limits to vision

Optical Limits to Vision

The optical system of the human eye has inherent limitations that affect visual clarity. Three primary sources of image blur are diffraction, aberrations, and scatter. Diffraction occurs when light waves bend as they pass through the pupil. This bending restricts the eye's resolving power. The effect of diffraction is influenced by pupil size:

- A smaller pupil increases diffraction, reducing resolution.
- A larger pupil minimizes diffraction, improving resolution.

However, while a larger pupil reduces diffraction, it can introduce other issues such as increased aberrations and scatter, which also impact visual quality. Achieving optimal vision requires a balance between these factors.

The human eye is also affected by monochromatic and chromatic aberrations, both of which degrade visual quality. Aberrations are commonly classified by their order, ranging from first-order to higher-order aberrations, each increasing in complexity. These optical imperfections are inherent to any optical system. While simpler aberrations may cause minor focus shifts on the retina, more complex aberrations result in distorted wavefronts that produce blurred or distorted retinal images. Among these, spherical and cylindrical

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aberrations are the most prevalent and are considered basic refractive errors. However, the eye is also susceptible to several higher-order aberrations—such as coma, trefoil, and spherical aberration—which further limit image quality, particularly in low-light conditions or with larger pupil sizes.

Light scatter is another significant optical factor that limits visual quality. It occurs when light entering the eye deviates from its intended path due to irregularities in ocular structures such as the cornea, lens, and vitreous. Scatter is particularly influenced by factors like age, corneal haze, cataracts, and tear film instability. Unlike diffraction and aberrations, which affect image sharpness in predictable ways, scatter causes a more diffuse spread of light, leading to glare, hazy vision, loss of contrast, and difficulty seeing in low-light conditions. This effect is especially pronounced in conditions like cataracts, where light scatter significantly reduces visual clarity. Managing scatter often requires medical intervention, such as surgical correction (e.g., cataract removal), improved tear film stability, or specialized optical coatings to reduce glare.

Limits Imposed by Photoreceptor Cells

The performance of the human visual system is significantly constrained by the structure and function of its photoreceptor cells—the rods and cones located in the retina. The distribution and density of these photoreceptor cells impose limits to human visual system. The highest concentration of cones is found in the fovea, providing sharp central vision and color perception. However, this region covers only a small portion of the retina, limiting detailed vision to a narrow field. Rods, which are responsible for low-light (scotopic) vision, are absent in the fovea and densely packed in the peripheral retina, limiting detailed perception in dim conditions. The density of cones in the fovea sets a limit on visual acuity, typically reaching a maximum of 20/10 in individuals with exceptional eyesight. Even with perfect optics, the spacing between cones restricts the eye's ability to resolve fine details. The three types of cones (S-cones, M-cones, and L-cones) respond to different wavelengths, defining the visible spectrum between 400–700 nm. Humans cannot naturally perceive wavelengths outside this range, such as ultraviolet or infrared light. In extremely bright conditions,

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photoreceptors can become saturated, reducing their ability to capture fine detail. Similarly, in very dim light, rod cells may fail to detect faint signals, impairing vision. These inherent constraints in photoreceptor cell structure and function collectively limit the sharpness, color range, and dynamic performance of human vision.

Neural Limits to Vision

The human visual system is also constrained by the brain's ability to process visual information. These neural limits arise from the way visual signals are transmitted, interpreted, and integrated within the visual pathways and the brain.

Visual information from photoreceptors is transmitted to the brain through retinal ganglion cells. Since these cells are less densely packed than photoreceptors, multiple receptors often share a single ganglion cell. This pooling reduces visual detail, particularly in peripheral vision.

The visual cortex can only process a limited amount of visual data at a time. While the eye may capture extensive detail, the brain filters and prioritizes information to prevent sensory overload. This selective processing limits awareness of peripheral details and rapid changes.

The brain's ability to distinguish subtle differences in shading or texture has its limits, particularly in low light or when viewing objects with minimal contrast.

The neural system adapts to changing light conditions, but the visual adaptation takes time. Sudden transitions from bright to dark environments (or vice versa) can temporarily impair vision.

The brain can only process motion up to a certain speed before the image becomes blurred. This limit, linked to the critical flicker fusion rate, varies with lighting conditions and individual differences.

Visual perception is also influenced by attention, expectations, and experience. For example, in attentional blindness can cause individuals to overlook even prominent visual details if they are focused elsewhere.

These neural constraints highlight that even with perfect optics and photoreceptor function, the brain's processing capabilities ultimately define the limits of visual perception.

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Key Take Away

- Vision is not just formation of an image on the retina—it is a complex neuroprocessing system that converts light into electric signals, integrates them through retinal circuits, and interprets them in the brain.
- The quality of vision depends on multiple attributes like acuity, contrast sensitivity, color perception, depth perception, peripheral vision, binocular vision and others.
- There are limits to increasing human vision.

Multiple Choice Questions

1. **What is the typical range of wavelengths the human eye can naturally perceive?**
   a. 100–900 nm b. 200–800 nm
   c. 400–700 nm d. 300–600 nm
2. **What is the primary function of the cornea in vision?**
   a. Adjust pupil size
   b. Convert light to neural signals
   c. Provide most of the eye's refractive power
   d. Detect motion
3. **Which condition increases light scatter in the eye and reduces visual clarity?**
   a. Myopia b. Cataracts
   d. Presbyopia d. Strabismus
4. **What is peripheral vision responsible for?**
   a. Color recognition
   b. Central clarity
   c. Spatial awareness and motion detection
   d. Depth interpretation
5. **Which chart is commonly used to measure visual acuity?**
   a. Ishihara chart b. Snellen chart
   c. Jaeger chart d. Amsler grid
6. **Why does visual acuity not exceed 20/10 in most humans?**
   a. Due to limitations in lens flexibility
   b. Due to rod cell inactivity in bright light
   c. Due to cone cell spacing in the fovea
   d. Due to small pupil size

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7. **Which optical limitation is caused by light bending as it passes through the pupil?**
   a. Aberration
   b. Diffraction
   c. Scatter
   d. Chromatic dispersion
8. **What does visual acuity primarily measure?**
   a. Ability to detect motion
   b. Ability to judge distances
   c. Ability to resolve fine details
   d. Ability to detect color differences
9. **Which part of the eye helps maintain its shape and ensures proper light transmission?**
   a. Retina
   b. Vitreous humor
   c. Cornea
   d. Iris
10. **What is the role of the crystalline lens in the human eye?**
    a. Regulates pupil size
    b. Maintains eye shape
    c. Adjusts focus through accommodation
    d. Enhances edge detection
11. **Which brain structure acts as a relay center for visual signals before they reach the visual cortex?**
    a. Cerebellum
    b. Hippocampus
    c. Thalamus (LGN)
    d. Hypothalamus
12. **What defines the maximum visual acuity achievable in humans?**
    a. Size of the pupil
    b. Density of rod cells
    c. Spacing of cone cells in the fovea
    d. Critical flicker fusion rate

Answers for MCQs

1. c	**2.** c	**3.** b	**4.** c	**5.** b	**6.** c
7. b	**8.** c	**9.** b	**10.** c	**11.** c	**12.** c

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