

Diabetes Awareness

Diabetes and the Effects on Your Vision

What is Diabetes?

The American Diabetes Association reports that 20.8 million people are afflicted with diabetes in the United States. Of these, 14.6 million are actually diagnosed with diabetes by a doctor, leaving more than 6.2 million people unaware that they are diabetic.¹ Diabetes is a disease in which the pancreas cannot produce insulin or the body cannot use insulin efficiently. Insulin is needed to break down sugars and starches and turn them into energy for your body. The lack of insulin can cause complications including eye diseases, kidney diseases, nervous system disorders, heart and blood vessel disease and stroke.

What does it mean for my eyes?

If diabetes is left untreated, eye diseases such as retinopathy (damage to the retina), cataract (clouding of eye lens) and glaucoma (increased fluid pressure in the eye) could develop, blurring vision and eventually leading to blindness. Other vision impairments often associated with diabetes are fluctuating vision, loss of the central or peripheral field of vision, seeing spots or flashes and occasional double vision.

The most common eye disease associated with diabetes is retinopathy. This occurs when the retinal blood vessels swell and leak fluid. New blood vessels can also grow on the surface of the retina, leaking fluid and blocking the light from reaching the retina. This blockage can cause blurred vision, and in advanced cases, even blindness.

The early symptoms of diabetic retinopathy may be hard to detect. By the time a person notices the change in vision, the disease could be in the late stages. That's why it's critical for diabetics to schedule a yearly eye examination which includes a dilated fundus examination. When the pupil is dilated, an optometrist or ophthalmologist examines the retina for signs of eye disease including diabetic retinopathy. If diabetic retinopathy is detected, it can often be treated by laser surgery.

What should I be doing?

While there is no cure for diabetes, proper medication, close monitoring of blood sugar levels, a healthy diet, and exercise help to manage this disease. Most importantly, schedule a visit with your eyecare specialist for a routine vision exam on an annual basis.

Don't forget the importance of your annual eye exam.

Source:

(1) American Diabetes Association, 2006 (www.diabetes.org)

