

Your Eyes & the Diabetes Epidemic

By Jonna Jefferis - Davis Vision Senior Staff Writer

You may have heard that diabetes has reached epidemic proportions in America. It's true. In 2010, nearly 2 million new cases were diagnosed among those over age 20. That brings the total number to a staggering 25.8 million, more than 8% of the population. Of those, 7 million people remain undiagnosed.

All diabetics are vulnerable to developing a potentially blinding eye condition that has no warning signs. Each year up to 24,000 Americans are blinded by diabetic retinopathy, a complication of diabetes. It is the leading cause of new blindness among adults aged 20–74.

While vision loss caused by retinopathy cannot be restored, early diagnosis and treatment can slow its progression. That's why regular comprehensive eye exams are so important. When a patient's eyes are dilated during an exam, the eye care provider has a clear view of blood vessels in the retina, and can look for indications of diabetic eye disease. The eye doctor is often the first to diagnose diabetes.



What Is Diabetic Eye Disease?

Diabetic eye disease is a group of eye problems that develop as a complication of diabetes. The group includes both cataracts and glaucoma. People with diabetes are 60% more likely to develop cataracts—cloudy scars that develop within the eye’s lens—than those without diabetes. Diabetics are also 40% more likely to get glaucoma, which results from an abnormal increase in eye pressure that may damage the optic nerve.

Diabetic retinopathy is the most common diabetic eye disease, affecting nearly half of Americans with diabetes. The longer you have diabetes, the more likely you are to develop it.

In fact, by the year 2020, the number of people suffering from diabetic eye disease is expected to nearly double.

The good news: Even those with advanced (proliferative) diabetic retinopathy can reduce their risk of blindness by 95% with timely treatment and appropriate follow-up care.

How Diabetic Retinopathy Can Destroy Vision

Diabetic retinopathy occurs when diabetes damages the small blood vessels inside the retina, the light-sensitive tissue at the back of the eye. In the early stages, called nonproliferative retinopathy, you may not notice any changes in your vision.

No eye treatment is necessary at this early stage unless you have macular edema, a condition that can occur at any stage. Macular edema causes fluid to leak from blood vessels into the macula, a small area at the center of the retina. As a result, the macula swells and vision becomes blurred.

As diabetic retinopathy advances to the more serious proliferative stage, some blood vessels that nourish the retina become blocked. Abnormal new vessels may begin to grow on the surface of the retina to replace the blocked vessels. If the vessels leak blood, severe vision loss and even blindness can result if the eye is not treated in time.

Treatments for macular edema and proliferative retinopathy consist of eye injections to reduce leaking fluid; and laser treatments to seal blood vessels and shrink abnormal vessels.

Living Right to Save Sight

“The diabetes epidemic that we are facing is very serious, and the resulting complications from this disease can be devastating to our health,” said Hugh R. Parry, president and CEO of Prevent Blindness America. In fact, by the year 2020, the number of people suffering from diabetic eye disease is expected to nearly double.

“By making a committed effort to lead a healthy lifestyle today,” continued Parry, “we can help delay or even prevent developing diabetes and its effects in the future.” As part of its new Live Right, Save Sight campaign, Prevent Blindness offers these recommendations:

- Maintain a healthy weight. If you are overweight, even a modest weight loss can help prevent Type 2 diabetes.
- Watch and control your blood sugar. A major scientific study recently concluded that controlling blood sugar is the best way to keep early diabetic retinopathy from advancing to the proliferative stage.
- Maintain a healthy blood pressure. High blood pressure increases the risk of eye disease, as well as heart disease, stroke and kidney disease.
- Quitting smoking can significantly reduce the risk for diabetic retinopathy as well as provide other health benefits.
- All women who are pregnant or who are planning to become pregnant and have been diagnosed with diabetes should get a full, dilated eye exam.

The most important step you can take to protect your eyes is to visit your eye care provider annually for a comprehensive eye exam, and to follow his or her advice and recommended treatment.

When you take charge of your health, you can preserve your sight!

Sources: Prevent Blindness America, National Eye Institute, Mayo Clinic, American Optometric Association, eyeSmart (American Academy of Ophthalmology), American Diabetes Association, American Association of Diabetes Educators

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