



Don't Lose Sight of Diabetic Eye Disease

Information for People with Diabetes

If you have diabetes, you probably know that your body can't use or store sugar properly. When your blood sugar gets too high, it can damage the blood vessels in your eyes. This damage may lead to diabetic retinopathy. In fact, the longer someone has diabetes, the more likely he or she is to have retinopathy. According to the American Academy of Ophthalmology, people with diabetes are 25 times more likely to lose vision than those who do not. How does this vision loss happen and how can it be prevented?

How does diabetes affect your eyes?

- ❖ Diabetes causes problems in the retina (lining on the inside of the eyeball) with the small blood vessels.
- ❖ High blood sugar can damage blood vessels in the retina. This causes the retina to swell and form deposits. When the blood vessels are damaged, they can leak fluid or bleed (hemorrhage).
- ❖ These leaks can cause damage to the retina and vision loss that can't be reversed.

Does everyone with diabetes have eye problems?

- ❖ Everyone who has diabetes is at risk for developing diabetic retinopathy, but not all develop it.
- ❖ Patients with controlled diabetes do better than those with uncontrolled diabetes. However, even a person with diabetes who is under control can still develop diabetic retinopathy — so, all patients with diabetes need yearly retinal exams.

What can I do to keep my eyes healthy?

- ❖ Keep blood sugar levels under control.
- ❖ Bring high blood pressure down.
- ❖ Be physically active everyday.
- ❖ Take all medication as directed by your doctor.
- ❖ Quit smoking.
- ❖ See an eye care professional once a year for a retinal diabetic eye exam.

How do I know if I have vision problems?

- ❖ Changes to your vision may happen slowly but can be serious.
- ❖ “Floaters” (flashes of light or dark gray spots in your vision) and double vision can be a sign of diabetic retinopathy.

What happens in a retinal diabetic eye exam?

- ❖ Having your doctor test your vision with an eye chart or a prescription for glasses is not the same as a retinal eye exam.
- ❖ For a retinal eye exam, an eye care professional puts drops in your eye to dilate the pupil (the black dot in the middle of the eye) and uses a special lens to look into the back of your eye.

What if my insurance doesn't cover vision care?

- ❖ Diabetes is a medical condition and when you visit an eye care provider to get a retinal eye exam, it is part of your medical insurance plan.
- ❖ To review eye exam coverage by Medicare in Nevada, go to www.medicare.gov/coverage.

What if I can't afford an eye exam?

Vision USA or Eyecare America can help by providing free basic eye health and vision care services to uninsured or low-income people and their families who do not have other means: www.aoa.org/visionusa.xml or www.eyecareamerica.org. The All About Vision Web site explains the Senior EyeCare Program, which helps qualifying seniors get eye exams without out-of-pocket costs. For information call (800) 222-EYES (3937) or visit www.allaboutvision.com/viewpoints/0300seniors.htm.

What's being done to prevent vision loss in people with diabetes?

The American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO), created a website for all patients, including those with diabetes. Specifically, the AAO works to educate providers and patients about the importance of annual dilated eye exams. Visit www.aoa.org or www.geteyesmart.org.

Where can I get more information?

The National Eye Institute (NEI) provides educational materials on diabetic retinopathy and other conditions at <http://catalog.nei.nih.gov/c-35-by-topic.aspx>.

The National Diabetes Education Program (NDEP) provides recipes, patient education materials, and a guideline for patients with diabetes that includes eye care at www.yourdiabetesinfo.org.

For people with diabetes, caring for their vision is as important a part of diabetes management as monitoring blood sugar, controlling the A1C, testing lipid levels and checking feet for cuts and sores. An annual dilated eye exam is an essential part of personal care.

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