



Living with Diabetes and Preventing Eye Disease

According to the Centers for Disease Control, in 2001 only 71.1 percent of people with diabetes reported having a dilated eye examination within the last year. If you are living with diabetes, eye problems or changes in your vision could lead to permanent loss of vision—therefore an annual dilated eye exam should be top on your preventive care list.

An indicator of diabetes may be blurred vision from macular edema (this occurs when damaged blood vessels leak fluid and lipids onto the macula, the part of the retina that enables us to see detail). The presence of floaters may indicate a hemorrhage and flashing lights may indicate retinal detachment. Early detection and appropriate treatment of diabetic eye disease greatly reduces the risk of vision loss.

Importance of a Dilated Eye Exam

Part of living with diabetes and preventing eye problems is having a dilated eye examination on at least an annual basis – more often if you have more serious retinopathy. During a dilated exam, your optometrist will look at your retina for early signs of the diabetic retinopathy, such as leaking blood vessels, retinal swelling (macular edema) and deposits on the retina – all of which are signs of leaking or damaged blood vessels. Having your regular doctor look at your eyes can be insufficient. Only an eye doctor can fully appreciate and detect signs and symptoms of retinopathy, glaucoma and cataracts.

What else can you do?

Several factors influence whether someone with diabetes develops retinopathy. These include blood sugar control, blood pressure levels, length of time with diabetes and family history. Of the factors you have control over; here are some ways to reduce your risk:

1. Keep your blood sugar levels under tight control. High blood sugar causes damage to blood vessels. For your eyes, this can mean damage to blood vessels in the retina and quite possibly changes in fluid pressure and clouding of the lens. Test your own glucose several times each day, and keep a daily record of your blood glucose levels. Be sure to get a Hemoglobin A1C test from your health care provider every 3 months if you take insulin and at least every 6 months if you don't take insulin. An A1C test measures how much glucose has been adhering to your red blood cells (your glucose level) over a longer period (3-4 months).
2. Get high blood pressure under control. High blood pressure can make eye problems worse by increasing damage to blood vessels.
3. Quit smoking.
4. Maintain a healthy diet and exercise regularly.
5. Be sure to see your optometrist if:
 - Your vision becomes blurry.
 - You have trouble reading signs or books.
 - You see double.
 - One or both of your eyes hurt.
 - Your eyes get red and stay that way.
 - You feel pressure in your eye.
 - You see spots or floaters.
 - Straight lines do not look straight.
 - Your peripheral vision (side vision) is limited.