

Diabetic Eye Disease

WHAT IS DIABETES?

Diabetes, simply stated, is a disease that prevents your body from making or using insulin which in turn leads to increased sugar levels in your bloodstream.

HOW DOES DIABETES AFFECT THE EYE?

Diabetes and its complications can affect many parts of the eye. Diabetes can cause changes in nearsightedness, farsightedness and premature presbyopia (the inability to focus on close objects). It can result in cataracts, glaucoma, paralysis of the nerves that control the eye muscles or pupil, and in decreased corneal sensitivity. Visual symptoms of diabetes include fluctuating or blurring of vision, occasional double vision, loss of visual field, and flashes and floaters within the eyes. Sometimes these early signs of diabetes are detected in a thorough optometric examination. The most serious eye problem associated with diabetes is diabetic retinopathy.

WHAT IS RETINOPATHY?

Diabetic retinopathy occurs when there is a weakening or swelling of the tiny blood vessels in the retina of your eye, resulting in blood leakage, the growth of new blood vessels and other changes. If diabetic retinopathy is left untreated, blindness can result.

CAN VISION LOSS FROM DIABETES BE PREVENTED?

Yes, in a routine eye examination, your optometrist can diagnose potential vision threatening changes in your eye that may be treated to prevent blindness. However, once damage has occurred, the effects are usually permanent. It is important to control your diabetes as much as possible to minimize your risk of developing retinopathy.

HOW IS DIABETIC RETINOPATHY TREATED?

In the early stages, diabetic retinopathy is monitored through eye health examinations. If necessary, it may be treated with laser therapy. A bright beam of light is focused on the retina, causing a burn which seals off leaking blood vessels. In other cases, surgery inside the eye may be necessary. Early detection of diabetic retinopathy is crucial, as treatment is much more likely to be successful at an early stage.

ARE THERE RISK FACTORS FOR DEVELOPING RETINOPATHY?

Several factors that increase the risk of developing retinopathy include smoking, high blood pressure, drinking alcohol and pregnancy.

HOW CAN DIABETES-RELATED EYE PROBLEMS BE PREVENTED?

Monitor and maintain control of your diabetes. See your physician regularly and follow instructions about diet, exercise and medication. See your optometrist, an eye care specialist, for a thorough eye examination when you are first diagnosed as a diabetic, at least annually thereafter and more frequently if recommended.