

Millions at Risk for Blindness Due to Diabetes

There are approximately 29 million Americans age 20 and older that have diabetes and almost one third of those are at risk for vision loss because they do not know they have the disease.

This is a tragedy waiting to happen because people with diabetes can develop diabetic retinopathy, a degenerative disease of the retina (the sensitive area at the back of the eye), which affects 5.3 million Americans age 18 and older.

More than one third of those diagnosed with diabetes do not adhere to vision care guidelines by forgoing a dilated eye exam every year. So, as part of November's Diabetic Eye Disease Awareness Month, ophthalmologists across the country are urging Americans with diabetes to get a dilated eye exam this year, and every year. Pregnant women with diabetes should have an eye exam in the first trimester, since diabetic eye disease can progress rapidly during pregnancy.

The longer a person has diabetes, the greater the risk for developing diabetic retinopathy. However, diabetic retinopathy does not only affect people who have had diabetes for many years, it can also appear within the first year or two after the onset of the disease. For some people, diabetic retinopathy is one of the first signs of the disease.

High blood sugar levels can weaken blood vessels in the eye's retina causing them to leak blood or fluid. This causes the retina to swell and can lead to vision loss. Blood sugar fluctuations can also promote growth of new, fragile blood vessels on the retina, which can break easily and leak blood into the vitreous (the clear, jelly-like substance that fills the center of the eye.) This can blur vision and lead to permanent vision impairment. High blood pressure and smoking can further damage blood vessels as well.

What are the signs to look for? Fluctuations in blood sugar levels can temporarily affect vision, so it's sometimes difficult to know if a serious eye problem is developing. That's one of the reasons strict control of your blood sugar is so important. If you notice a vision change in one eye, a change that lasts more than a day or two or changes not associated with fluctuations in blood sugar, call your Eye M.D. promptly.

If you're diagnosed with diabetes, be sure to schedule a complete dilated eye exam once a year or as often as your Eye M.D. suggests. Don't smoke and keep your blood sugar under control through diet and exercise.

Eye health care is provided by the three "O's" – opticians, optometrists and ophthalmologists. It is the ophthalmologist, or Eye M.D., who can treat it all – eye diseases and injuries, and perform eye surgery.