

Diabetic Retinopathy

Does diabetes affect the eye? Diabetes can affect the eye and vision by causing cataracts, glaucoma, and most importantly, damage to blood vessels inside the eye, a condition known as "diabetic retinopathy". Diabetic eye disease is the leading cause of blindness in America. People with untreated diabetes are said to be 25 times more at risk for blindness than the general population.

What is diabetic Retinopathy? Diabetic retinopathy is a complication of diabetes that is caused by changes in the blood vessels of the retina. When blood vessels in the retina are damaged, they may leak blood and grow fragile, brush-like branches and scar tissue. This can blur or distort the visual images that the retina sends to the brain. There can also be swelling called edema in the retina further blurring vision.

Why is it important to get an annual eye exam if I have diabetes? A comprehensive eye exam with fundus photography is recommended at least once a year to check for bleeding and other eye disorders caused by diabetes. Earlier diagnosis of diabetic retinopathy leads to better outcomes. Symptoms of diabetic retinopathy are usually only in late stages where severe vision loss is forthcoming, and cannot be fully recovered by treatment, so annual examinations are crucial to obtaining treatment before it is too late!

What increases my chances of getting diabetic Retinopathy?

- High blood sugar levels
- Hemoglobin A1C blood test above 6
- The longer a person has had diabetes, the higher the risk of developing diabetic retinopathy
- Having high blood pressure and high cholesterol along with diabetes

What can I do to help monitor my diabetes? You must take an active role in monitoring your diabetes. It is very important to partner with your primary care doctor and get a special blood test every 3-4 months. It is called a hemoglobin A1C test. The value of the A1C test is that it provides an excellent measure of how your blood glucose levels have been over the past two or three months, and so gives more of a "big picture" of your overall blood sugar control. Anything over 7 means much better control is needed on blood sugar levels. Having this number updated every 3-4 months helps the eye doctor plan treatment and proper follow up schedule.

What are my treatment options for Diabetic Retinopathy? The very early forms of diabetic retinopathy do not need treatment, just monitoring. Advanced stages of diabetic retinopathy can be treated by a surgeon with lasers, injections, and surgery. These treatments can all help but the blood sugar levels and A1C must come down for treatment to be effective long term.

