

Eye Health: **Diabetes-Related Retinopathy**

Retinopathy is an eye disease often caused by diabetes and is the number one cause of blindness in working-age adults. There are steps you can take to prevent or delay it.

Managing your diabetes helps, but even someone managing their diabetes well is still at risk. Reaching your health targets is key. Retinopathy is usually very treatable, especially if you find out about it in the earliest stages.

Getting your yearly dilated and comprehensive eye exam or retinal photography will help your eye doctor find the signs as early as possible. Knowing that there's a problem will allow you to take steps to prevent or delay vision loss.

What is diabetes-related retinopathy?

Retinopathy affects the blood vessels in the retina of your eye. Your retina is the light-sensitive part of the eye with millions of cells. These cells send images to the brain, allowing you to see.

It may be possible to reverse the damage in early or moderate retinopathy. In the latest stages of retinopathy, the damage may not be reversible.

What causes diabetes-related retinopathy?

Over time, high blood glucose (blood sugar) levels cause damage to the small blood vessels in the retina. Other factors, like smoking cigarettes, high blood pressure, or high cholesterol, can increase this damage. Keeping an A1C below 7% helps prevent retinopathy.

Symptoms of Diabetes-Related Retinopathy

There are usually no symptoms in the earliest stages of retinopathy, which is why it's so important to schedule a yearly dilated and comprehensive eye exam. Some people may experience symptoms including:

- Blurred vision
- Distorted vision
- Impaired colors
- Seeing floaters
- Loss of vision

Remember, you can have retinopathy even if you aren't experiencing any of these symptoms. Your yearly eye exam is the best way to detect retinopathy in the earliest stages.

There two major stages of retinopathy:

- **Non-proliferative retinopathy**

If you have non-proliferative retinopathy, small areas of swelling occur and the blood vessels in your retina begin to leak. This leaking starts to cause areas of your eye that don't get enough circulation, oxygen, or other nutrients.

- **Proliferative retinopathy**

If you have proliferative retinopathy, your eye has started to make abnormal new blood vessels in your retina to increase blood flow. These blood vessels aren't healthy and can bleed into your eye, which causes floaters and threatens your vision. Non-proliferative retinopathy is usually painless, but needs to be treated immediately, usually with surgery. If left untreated, this leads to permanent loss of vision.

Treatment

It's important to work with your health care team to make sure your treatment plan will help you reach your health goals and blood glucose management, A1C, and your blood pressure targets. Reaching your health targets will help prevent or delay damage to the blood vessels in your eyes.

Treatments include:

- **Injectable medications:** Injected medications can improve your vision or help protect you from future vision loss. This treatment will be repeated over the course of months or years depending on your needs.
- **Laser therapy:** Usually painless, this quick procedure includes numbing and dilating your eyes. It decreases excess fluid in the macula from leaky blood vessels.
- **Surgery (Vitrectomy):** This procedure takes place in a surgical room of a clinic or hospital under local or general anesthesia. By removing gel, blood, and scar tissue, it aims to improve and preserve your vision.



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