

Diabetes and Your Eyes

Yearly exams help track diabetic retinopathy



How serious is the widespread occurrence of diabetes? Very serious, indeed, says the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: More than 20.8 million Americans suffer from the chronic disorder.

Fortunately, however, diabetes can be controlled – provided that patients are diagnosed early and follow treatment regimens aimed at managing blood sugar, reducing obesity and increasing exercise.

If you're being treated for diabetes, you've probably been warned about another important facet of the illness: diabetic retinopathy, in which damage to blood vessels in the eye can slowly destroy one's vision.

"It's vitally important that people who have diabetes get yearly checkups for the early detection, treatment and management of diabetic retinopathy because it now ranks as the leading cause of new adult blindness in the United States," says Mark Bronstein, M.D., medical director of VSP.

How does diabetic retinopathy attack eyesight? Tiny blood vessels inside the eye swell or bleed, Dr. Bronstein explains. Unprocessed blood sugars, fats and proteins leach out of the weakened blood vessels and form exudates, or waxy deposits, on the retina. New, weak blood vessels form to help circulate blood, but these vessels also can break, leading to further damage.

"When the blood vessels become damaged, you start getting a decrease in blood supply to the retina," says Dr. Bronstein. "That can result in significant vision loss, even blindness, if the condition is left untreated."

"The scary thing about the disorder is that someone who has diabetes can go several years without noticing any impairment of vision while a great deal of damage is being done to the blood vessels in the eyes," he says. "To prevent that, the best line of defense is a yearly eye exam."

"Regular eye exams are a must for all people who have diabetes," says Nicole Johnson, former Miss America. "I have one every year and feel confident that I will never lose my vision because of this preventive measure."

Nicole was diagnosed with diabetes at age 19 and wore an insulin pump on her hip during the beauty pageant. The disease hasn't slowed her down, she says. She credits her yearly eye exam with helping her maintain an active way of life. •