DIABETES AND EYE DISEASE

DIABETIC RETINOPATHY

People who have diabetes are at risk of developing this retinal disease, which can ultimately lead to blindness if left untreated. Diabetic retinopathy can be treated or prevented with medication or laser procedures if detected early. The symptoms of diabetic retinopathy will not become evident until permanent damage has already been done, so early detection is key. Because of this, patients who have diabetes should have an annual dilated eye exam, even if their vision appears to be fine. Diabetics can also be at a higher risk of developing cataracts, so regular eye exams are crucial.

If you are being examined for an eyeglass or contact lens prescription during your appointment, it is important to have the examination when your blood sugar is stable. Fluctuations in blood sugar can cause changes in your glasses prescription, so it is best to keep your blood sugar balanced for several days prior to your visit.

WHAT IS DIABETIC RETINOPATHY?

When blood sugar levels are high, they can cause damage to vessels in the retina. This damage may cause leaking of serum that can accumulate in the center of the retina, called the macula. The result is “macular edema,” and it can reduce your ability to see fine details.

In another severe form of retinopathy known as proliferative retinopathy, abnormal vessels can develop on the surface of the retina. These vessels can also bleed or create scar tissue, leading to worsening eyesight, retinal detachments, and eventually a complete loss of vision.

WHO IS AT RISK?

People who have had Type I diabetes for at least ten years have a higher risk of developing diabetic retinopathy, but anyone who has Type II diabetes or borderline diabetes (“pre-diabetic”) should be seen for immediately after diagnosis, and then yearly for eye exams, since signs and symptoms will not be noticeable until permanent damage has already occurred and retinopathy may be present at the first time of diagnosis. Smoking and high blood pressure can also increase your risk.

More information on other side of this document, including symptoms.
SIGNS OF DIABETIC RETINOPATHY

Potential signs of diabetic retinopathy include:

- Hazy vision
- “Floaters”
- Missing spots of vision
- Double vision

If you have noticed some or all of these symptoms, please contact an eye doctor as soon as possible to make an appointment for a comprehensive medical eye exam. Your doctor will diagnose the issue and move forward with an appropriate treatment plan in order to help prevent future damage and preserve your remaining vision.

WHAT IS A DIABETIC EYE EXAM?

A diabetic exam needs to be a comprehensive medical eye exam (CMEE) that includes dilation of the eyes. First, an ophthalmic assistant or technician will document any medical or family history and current symptoms, then perform a number of tests to check pressure, muscle function, and dryness, and more. He or she will also perform the refractometry, a guide to your current glasses prescription. If you have medical eye conditions or are at risk, the doctor may authorize additional tests. Depending on your eye health, the technician portion can take 20-45 minutes.

To obtain a clear look at your retina and lens, the doctor will examine and assess your eye health after your eyes have been dilated. (This is how they are able to observe any changes to the retina caused by diabetic retinopathy.) The doctor will also review and verify the findings of the tests performed and documented by the technician and optician. Any problems are addressed and explained, as well as any required medications, tests or procedures. Further tests are scheduled as needed.

The dilated portion of the exam can often be much shorter than the technician portion, since the tests already performed will give the doctor a thorough picture of your eye health. You are encouraged to ask the doctor any questions you may have, and you will be given a glasses prescription if one is needed.

WHAT TREATMENT OPTIONS ARE AVAILABLE?

If you have already experienced permanent vision damage due to diabetic retinopathy, there are certain medications that may be able to help prevent further damage to your eyesight. There are also gentle laser treatments available that can assist in retaining your existing vision. A low vision specialist can recommend equipment that can magnify or augment your ability to see. If you have diabetic retinopathy, early treatment and frequent follow-up care can reduce your risk of blindness by 95 percent.

HOW CAN I PREVENT DIABETIC RETINOPATHY?

Maintaining a healthy diet, exercising regularly, controlling your blood sugar, quitting smoking, watching your blood pressure, and receiving a yearly eye exam are all excellent ways to help reduce your risk of developing diabetic retinopathy.