# Healthy Living

## The impact of diabetes on the eyes

Diabetes is characterized by improper insulin production or usage that affects the amount of glucose in the blood. High blood sugar can create a cascading effect that makes people vulnerable to many health-related issues, some of which are less recognizable than others. For example, diabetes can lead to vision loss.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, diabetes can affect the eyes by damaging the microvasculature (tiny blood vessels) that nourish the retina. The retina is the light-sensitive tissue lining the back of the eye. When high blood sugar becomes chronic, it will weaken these capillaries, causing them to swell, leak fluid or close off completely. As a result of the reduced blood flow, the eye will produce fragile blood vessels that may bleed easily, often leading to scar tissue and significant visual impairment, says the National Eye Institute. This is just one of the many ways the eye can be affected.

Diabetes has been linked to many different types of vision loss.

• Diabetic retinopathy: This is the most common cause of vision loss in working-age adults, says Genetech. Diabetic retinopathy occurs when the tiny blood vessels swell, form microaneurysms and leak fluid into the retina. When the retinopathy advances, oxygen-deprived retinal tissue signals the growth of fragile new blood vessels that can leak into the clear gel filling the eye or trigger scar tissue formation that can cause the retina to detach.

• Diabetic macular edema (DME): This is a major complication of diabetic retinopathy that occurs when fluid accumulates in the macula, which is the central portion of the retina. The macula is responsible for sharp, straight-ahead vision. DME will blur central vision, making tasks like driving, reading and recognizing faces more difficult, says the American Journal of Managed Care®.

• Glaucoma: Poor circulation and abnormal vessel growth can block the eye's internal drainage system, elevating intraocular pressure. This damages the optic nerve. Diabetes doubles the risk of developing glaucoma, warns the American Academy of Ophthalmology.

• Cataracts: High glucose levels in ocular fluids can cause the lens to swell and accumulate sugar alcohol deposits. This may lead to premature clouding of the lens.

It's important to note that diabetic eye damage often develops slowly. The early stages often are asymptomatic, but as the disease advances, symptoms may come forth. This underscores the importance of annual dilated eye exams when eye doctors can examine the eye's structural blood vessels to check for damage before visual symptoms appear. Sometimes an eye exam may be the first indication a person has diabetes. Managing glucose levels can significantly slow damage in the retinal tissue.

The changes that take place in the body due to diabetes include various issues that can affect vision.


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