Diabetes Can Harm Your Eyesight: Be Aware and Act Now!

If you have diabetes, it can attack many parts of the body, including the kidneys (diabetic nephropathy), nerve endings (diabetic neuropathy), and the back of the eye (diabetic retinopathy). Many people with diabetes also have high cholesterol and triglycerides in their blood, which increases the risk of having a heart attack or stroke.

Diabetes and Eyesight
Diabetes is a disease that occurs when your blood glucose (sugar) is too high. Blood glucose is your main source of energy and comes from the food you eat. Normally, a hormone called insulin—that is produced by the pancreas—keeps the level of glucose in our blood in check. However, in type 1 diabetes, the body does not make insulin, and in type 2 diabetes, the body does not respond normally to the insulin it makes.

When excess sugar builds up in the blood it can damage the blood vessels in the back of the eye that keep the retina healthy. The retina is a layer of tissue in the back of the eye that converts light into nerve signals that the brain interprets as an image.

If you have uncontrolled diabetes, the retinal blood vessels may leak and thicken in the center of the retina (an area called the macula), which is really important for clear and sharp vision. As a result, diabetic macular edema develops, causing blurry, unclear, and reduced vision. Secondly, the retina starts growing new blood vessels (proliferative diabetic retinopathy), which are abnormal, very fragile and easily breakable, causing bleeding in the eye and retinal detachment.

More than half of people who have diabetes (type 1, type 2, and gestational) develop diabetic retinopathy, which can cause decreased vision or blindness in adults from ages 20 to 74. If left untreated, the sight loss can become irreversible. Patients with uncontrolled diabetes can develop a serious eye disease and not even know it until irreversible vision loss has occurred.

Protect Your Eyes
In early stages of disease, diabetic retinopathy often does not cause symptoms. Once the symptoms become noticeable, the eye damage is severe. That is why it is important for anyone with diabetes to have regular eye exams. Your chance of developing eye disease and having a more severe case increases when: you have diabetes over a long period of time, your blood glucose or blood sugar levels are too high, or you have high blood pressure and lipids.

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