

Diabetes and your eyes

More than a million Australians have diabetes, and of these, more than 70% will develop some changes in their eyes within 15 years of diagnosis. Optometrists have a fundamental role in detecting diabetic eye disease in the early stages, when it is easier to treat.

Diabetes sometimes weakens the focusing ability of the eye, or causes vision to fluctuate from day to day. This is often relieved when blood sugar levels are brought under control. However, after diabetes has been present for some years, changes may occur in the retina at the back of the eye. This is known as diabetic retinopathy, and the risk of developing it increases with the length of time you have had diabetes, and is also affected by your level of blood sugar control.

Background diabetic retinopathy is the less severe, early form of the condition. It usually does not require any treatment, but should be monitored carefully. The best way to monitor diabetic retinopathy changes

is with digital retinal photography. A high resolution digital photo of the retina can be examined carefully for changes, and then electronically stored as a permanent record. Digital retinal photographs enable you to see directly the changes that are occurring in your eyes, and help your optometrist to detect subtle changes earlier, when treatment is most successful.

Proliferative diabetic retinopathy is the more severe form, and requires early treatment to prevent vision loss. Using digital photography and other techniques, your optometrist can recognise the signs of proliferative retinopathy, and organise referral to an eye specialist for treatment. Like most things, early detection is the key, which means that regular checkups are vital. People with diabetes should visit their optometrist on a yearly basis, or more often if advised.

Diabetes can have other effects on the eyes. A rare complication of diabetes is the sudden onset of double vision. This is usually temporary, but can occasionally last for a few months. This double vision can usually be managed

with correcting lenses until it resolves. Glaucoma is an eye disease which is slightly more common in people with diabetes. In glaucoma, the optic nerve which delivers messages from the eye to the brain is slowly and progressively damaged, often associated with an increase in the pressure of the fluid in the eye. It is generally treated with eye drops, but once again, early detection is vital.

Cataract is the process where the lens in the eye becomes cloudy. Everybody develops cataracts slowly as they get older, but people with diabetes often develop them at a younger age. Optometrists can detect cataracts in a regular eye examination, and if required, refer you to an eye specialist. To treat cataracts, the specialist will remove the entire lens from the eye, and replace it with an artificial, plastic lens. This is a day procedure, taking less than 30 minutes, and most people see better the very next day. As a bonus, many people who have their cataracts removed do not need to wear their glasses as often, or occasionally can go without them completely.

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