

Looking after your eyes

Looking after your eyes is important when you have diabetes. You have an increased risk of developing eye problems which, if left untreated, can lead to poor vision and blindness.

You can greatly reduce your risk of serious vision loss from diabetes by having regular eye examinations and receiving treatment early. The earlier eye problems are detected and treated, the better the result.

Diabetes can cause both short-term and long-term problems with your eyes.

Short-term eye problems

High blood glucose levels can cause a short-term blurring of vision. This is due to temporary changes in the shape of the lens of your eye. Blurred vision can occur at different times – before you are diagnosed with diabetes, when starting a new treatment for diabetes, or when blood glucose levels fluctuate. Talk to your doctor about this if you are concerned.

Long-term eye problems

The risk of serious eye problems increases when you have high blood glucose levels over a long period of time, or if your blood pressure or cholesterol levels are high. Long-term eye problems include diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma and cataracts.

Diabetic retinopathy

Diabetic retinopathy occurs when, over time, high blood glucose levels damage the small blood vessels in the retina of the eye, causing them to leak fluid. New blood vessels grow to make up for the ones that are damaged, but these new vessels are weak and easily rupture (haemorrhage).

In the early stages, there may be no symptoms or changes to your vision but the onset can be identified by an eye test. As retinopathy progresses, symptoms can include:

- » blurred or distorted vision (that is not improved with prescription glasses)
- » seeing floating spots or flashes
- » sensitivity to light and glare
- » reduced night vision.



Helpline 1300 136 588

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It's important for diabetic retinopathy to be diagnosed early, so that it can be treated before it becomes more serious and affects your vision.

Glaucoma

Glaucoma occurs when there is damage to the optic nerve, causing a build-up of pressure inside the eye. It can affect anyone but it's more common in people with diabetes.

If it's not treated early, glaucoma can lead to loss of vision or blindness. There are no warning signs for glaucoma, but problems can be picked up early if you have regular eye checks that include measuring the pressure in your eyes.

Cataracts

Cataracts occur when the lens in the eye becomes cloudy, which can reduce vision. Although sun damage and ageing are the main risk factors, people with diabetes tend to develop cataracts faster and at a younger age.

Eye checks

To look after your eyes and prevent vision loss, have your eyes checked regularly by an optometrist or an eye specialist (ophthalmologist) to look for early signs of damage.

- » Have your eyes checked when you are first diagnosed with diabetes, and then every two years.
- » You may be advised to have your eyes checked more often, especially if you already have eye problems or you are planning a pregnancy.

- » Your eyes can be checked by an optometrist without the need for a medical referral. This is covered by Medicare.
- » If you notice any changes in your vision in between your routine eye checks, discuss this with your optometrist, eye specialist or doctor.

Looking after your eyes

In most cases, the earlier eye problems are treated, the better the result. Your eye specialist can advise what treatments are available.

To help reduce your risk of eye damage:

- » Aim for blood glucose levels and blood pressure as close to your target ranges as possible. Regular appointments with your health professionals can help you with this.
- » Keep your cholesterol level within the recommended range.
- » See your optometrist or ophthalmologist for an eye check as soon as you notice any changes in your vision.
- » Don't smoke. If you do smoke, try and quit. If you feel you can't give up smoking on your own, ask for help – talk to your doctor or call the Quitline on 137 848.
- » If the health of your eyes is causing you to feel worried or anxious, speak to a psychologist or social worker.



More information

For more information, go to www.visionaustralia.org.au

The NDSS and you

The NDSS provides a range of services to help you manage your diabetes. These include our Infoline and website for advice on diabetes management, NDSS products and a range of support programs to help you learn more about managing your diabetes.

Published June 2016