

Keep Sight of Diabetic Eye Disease

Closing the Gap, Diabetes • February/March 1999

Of the approximately 16 million Americans who suffer from either type 1 or type 2 diabetes, *all* are at risk of developing sight-threatening eye diseases commonly associated with diabetes, according to the National Eye Institute (NEI). Though early detection and timely treatment can substantially reduce the risk of severe visual loss or blindness from diabetic eye disease, many people at risk are not having their eyes examined regularly to detect these problems before they impair vision.

Increased awareness of the sight-saving benefits of annual eye examinations through dilated pupils is essential to reduce the significant social and personal costs of diabetic eye disease.

There are three sight-threatening eye problems that people with diabetes may develop as a complication of the disease.

- **Diabetic retinopathy**—which damages blood vessels in the retina, the light-sensitive tissue at the back of the eye that translates light into electrical impulses that the brain interprets as vision.
- **Cataract**—an opacity of the eye's crystalline lens that results in blurring of normal vision. People with diabetes are twice as likely to develop a cataract as someone who does not have the disease. In addition, cataracts tend to develop at an earlier age in people with diabetes.
- **Glaucoma**—occurs when increased fluid pressure in the eye leads to progressive optic nerve damage. People with diabetes are nearly twice as likely to develop glaucoma as other adults.

Diabetic retinopathy is the most common diabetic eye disease. About eight million people—half of the nation's estimated 16 million people with diabetes—have at least early signs of diabetic retinopathy.

Of this group, about 700,000 have serious retinal disease, with approximately 65,000 Americans progressing each year to proliferative retinopathy—the disease's most sight-threatening stage. Annually, as many as 25,000 people go blind from the disorder, making it a leading cause of blindness among working Americans.

For many people with diabetic retinopathy, there are no early symptoms. There is no pain, no blurred vision, and no ocular inflammation. In fact, many people do not develop any visual impairment until the disease has advanced well into its proliferative stage. At this point, vision cannot be restored.

However, some people in the early and advanced stages of diabetic retinopathy may notice a change in their central and/or color vision. The loss of central vision results from macular edema, which can often be effectively treated.

Because diabetic eye disease often has no early symptoms, it is detected during a comprehensive eye examination through dilated pupils.

As part of its mission to address diabetic eye disease through biomedical research, disease prevention, and health promotion, NEI has established the National Eye Health Education Program (NEHEP). Coordinated by NEI and in partnership with various public and private organizations, NEHEP is focusing on public education programs that encourage early detection and timely treatment of diabetic eye disease and glaucoma—the leading cause of blindness in African Americans over age 40.

For more information, call (301) 496-5248. NEHEP has printed materials for African Americans and Hispanics. Call 1-800-869-2020. ❖

