

Diabetic Eye Disease

BY DR. THOMAS P. FINLEY, OPTOMETRIST

Diabetic retinopathy is the leading cause of blindness in American adults aged 20-70.

Nearly half of all people with diabetes will develop some degree of diabetic retinopathy during their lifetime. The longer a person has diabetes, the more likely they are to develop diabetic retinopathy.

Because diabetes can cause blindness and there are often no warning symptoms, early diagnosis and treatment is essential. As the disease progresses, a person may notice their vision getting worse. Some people experience their vision fluctuating throughout the day.

It's not uncommon for a person with diabetes to notice their vision changing from day to day as their blood sugar changes.

What happens to the eye in diabetes?

In diabetic retinopathy, blood vessels in the back of the eye (retina) become weakened and begin to leak blood and fluid. Your eye doctor may be first to detect that you have diabetes based on your eye health observed during your exam.

Other changes in the eye may also occur. The macula of the eye can become swollen from fluids leaking, causing blurred vision. In more advanced stages, new fragile blood vessels may begin growing. These new vessels are very weak and prone to leak which leads to more damage and significant vision loss. Once the damage begins, it seems more difficult to control.

What should a person with diabetes do?

People with diabetes must learn to manage their condition by monitoring their blood sugar

regularly and maintaining a good diet and weight control. When medication is prescribed, they must administer the medication as indicated. Exercise regularly. Unfortunately, diabetes is a lifetime disease in most cases, so there's no quick fix. Daily lifestyle changes and diligence are required for best management.

All diabetics should have a thorough eye examination with pupil dilation at least every year. Both optometrists and ophthalmologists can perform these examinations. Your doctor should explain all findings to your satisfaction and communicate with your other doctors.

When diabetic eye changes become more severe, it may be necessary to have laser surgery on the back of your eye to help stop the leakage. This helps reduce the risk of severe vision loss. Your eye doctor will recommend a good specialist for this advanced treatment when needed. As long as you're comfortable with the care you're receiving, there's no need to see a specialist unless your eye disease becomes more advanced. This is another reason why it's so important to trust the care you're receiving from your eye doctor. Focus on the care you're receiving versus the initials after your doctor's name.

Other eye problems can occur in people with diabetes. Glaucoma and early cataracts are twice as likely to occur in people with diabetes. Other conditions like high blood pressure, smoking and pregnancy may cause diabetic eye disease to worsen. Annual eye examinations (or sometimes more frequent exams) are the best way to guard against debilitating vision loss from diabetes.

To summarize:

- Keep your blood glucose and blood pressure as close to normal as possible.
- Have a comprehensive eye examination with pupil dilation at least once a year.
- Guard against other eye diseases like cataracts and glaucoma.
- Maintain a healthy diet and don't smoke.
- If you're pregnant and have diabetes, see your eye doctor during your first 3 months of pregnancy.

Can people with diabetes wear contact lenses safely?

Diabetics are more susceptible to infections than non-diabetics, and this is a concern with contact lenses. Eye infections can be very serious and cause permanent vision loss. However, with proper care and wearing, people with diabetes can wear contact lenses safely.



Dr. Thomas P. Finley received his Bachelor of Science degree from St. Francis University in Pennsylvania, and his Doctorate of Optometry from the Pennsylvania College of Optometry. Following graduation, he served as an optometry officer in the United States Air Force and was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal and the Commendation Medal.

Dr. Finley has served as an adjunct clinical professor for three optometry schools, and has been a clinical investigator for two major contact lens companies. He has published several articles in professional and trade journals and local newspapers and has also lectured at educational conferences.

Dr. Finley is a Fellow of the American Academy of Optometry, a Fellow of the Virginia Academy of Optometry, and a member of the American Optometric Association, Virginia Optometric Association, and Northern Virginia Optometric Society. He is an Advisory Board member for TLC Laser Eye Centers.

Locally, Dr. Finley serves as an active member of the Herndon Rotary Club (past president), Chamber of Commerce (past board member), Optimist Club (youth sports' coach), and Knights of Columbus (past board member). He serves on the board of the Jeanie Schmidt Free Clinic. He was awarded Herndon's "Distinguished Service Award," the Chamber of Commerce's "Small Business of the Year Award," and The Times Newspapers "Best Eye Doctor Award." He has owned his Herndon optometry practice since 1989.

Dr. Finley was recently recognized by the Virginia Optometric Association as Distinguished Optometrist of the Year.

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