

Diabetic Retinopathy

What Is It?

Diabetic retinopathy can be a serious complication of diabetes in which blood sugar causes blood vessels in the back of the eye to swell and leak blood. Retinopathy can lead to poor vision and even blindness and is mostly likely to develop in patients who have been diabetic for 10 years or more. Without treatment, this condition can cloud vision and destroy the retina, resulting in impaired vision or blindness.

What Are the Symptoms?

In the early stages of diabetic retinopathy, there may be no symptoms at all. As the disease progresses, intermittent blurred vision may occur. In the later stages of the disease, patients experience cloudy vision, blind spots, or "floaters." Floaters are clumps of blood inside the vitreous, the jelly-like fluid that fills the inside of the eye.

Preventing Diabetic Retinopathy

Keeping good control of blood sugar levels can help prevent diabetic retinopathy. However, even controlled diabetes can lead to retinopathy. Lifestyle changes such as a carefully monitored diet, regular exercise, control of blood sugar and blood pressure, and not smoking are the most effective methods of limiting the impact of diabetes.

Detection and Diagnosis

Diabetic patients require routine eye examinations at least once each year so that related eye problems can be detected and treated early. Most diabetic patients have frequent follow-up visits with an internist or endocrinologist who works closely with an ophthalmologist. It is possible to detect diabetic retinopathy at the earliest stages and, when treated then, the chances of safeguarding vision are improved.

Treatment

Diabetic retinopathy can be treated with a laser beam treatment called photocoagulation. This treatment stops the growth of blood vessels and seals the weak or leaking blood vessels. These treatments may improve vision and have been found effective in preventing further deterioration.

A surgical procedure called a vitrectomy may be performed if blood gets into the center of the eye (the vitreous humor). A vitrectomy removes scar tissue and cloudy fluid from inside the eye. This procedure is more likely to be successful the earlier it is performed.

Visit these websites for more information:

<http://www.nei.nih.gov/health/diabetic/retinopathy.asp>
http://diabetes.niddk.nih.gov/dm/pubs/complications_eyes/index.htm

