Diabetic Retinopathy Frequently Asked Questions

What is diabetic retinopathy?
Diabetic retinopathy is one of the most common eye diseases in the United States. Diabetic retinopathy is an eye problem caused by diabetes mellitus. It affects the retina, which is the light-sensitive tissue at the back of the eye. Retinopathy occurs when diabetes damages the tiny blood vessels in the retina. In some people with diabetic retinopathy, blood vessels may swell and leak fluid. The longer you have had diabetes, and the more the blood sugars fluctuate, the more likely you are to have retinopathy. The damage can lead to problems with your vision, including blindness.

What are the symptoms?
Blurred vision, black spots, flashes of light, holes in your vision. Diabetic retinopathy usually affects both eyes.

How is it treated?
Early detection, before the retina has been badly damaged, is extremely important in reducing vision loss from this disease. Laser treatment is usually very effective at preventing further vision loss. Your eye surgeon may use the laser to seal leaking blood vessels or destroy abnormal vessels. Surgical removal of the vitreous gel (vitrectomy) may also help improve vision if the retina has not been severely damaged. Sometimes injections of anti-VEGF (vascular endothelial growth factor) medicine help to shrink new blood vessels in proliferative diabetic retinopathy.

How can I help prevent eye problems with diabetes?
Working with your medical doctor to control blood sugar, blood pressure, and cholesterol are the most important steps you can take in preventing eye problems if you have diabetes. Maintain a normal weight, limit unhealthy fats, substitute complex carbohydrates for simple carbohydrates, participate in an exercise program and do not smoke.

Regular eye exams are particularly important if you have diabetes. A thorough eye exam can identify problems early on while there are still options for treatment. Early treatment can help stabilize the eye and prevent further vision loss.

How can I take care of myself?
Schedule regular eye exams to make sure you get treatment when you need it. Tell your doctor if you have any change in your vision. As long as you have diabetes, there is a chance you will develop retinopathy. However, careful control of your blood sugar levels will help delay and possibly prevent vision loss.

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