

Southeastern Retina Associates

Diseases and Surgery of the Retina and Vitreous

Diabetic Eye Disease – The Facts

By Rohan Shah, MD

Diabetes is here to stay and its prevalence seems to have only reached the tip of the iceberg. Today, approximately 285 million people worldwide suffer from the disease and this is expected to rise to 439 million by 2030. Ninety-three million people currently are faced with diabetic retinopathy, one of the most common complications of diabetes. One's risk of developing diabetic eye disease increases with longer disease duration, elevated glycosylated hemoglobin (HgbA_{1c}) and cholesterol levels, and uncontrolled blood pressure.

Blindness is 25 times more common in patients with diabetes, and vision loss most commonly occurs due to the development of diabetic macular edema (swelling within the retina) and proliferative diabetic retinopathy (abnormal blood vessel growth in response to poor retinal blood flow). Fortunately, with vital clinical trials and the formation of the Diabetic Retinopathy Clinical Research Network (DRCR.net), there has been a recent revolution in the treatment of the disease with a clear visual benefit demonstrat-

ed by the use of laser photocoagulation and intravitreal injection of anti-vascular endothelial growth factor (anti-VEGF) agents. When identified early with regular diabetic eye exams, this disease can be controlled and dramatic vision loss can be prevented. The startling facts, however, are that approximately one-third of diabetic patients have never had an eye exam and one-third of patients who would benefit from disease treatment have neglected to see an eye specialist in over 2 years.

The facts are scary and the statistics seem daunting, but what can we do? The answer lies in being proactive and focusing on early disease identification, treatment, and prevention. Speak with your primary care physician and focus on controlling your risk factors (HgbA_{1c}, cholesterol, and blood pressure). Seek evaluation by an eye specialist who can monitor the disease and recommend treatment early, instead of when it is too late. The challenge to control diabetic retinopathy is immense for physicians and patients; however, by taking steps to identify and treat the disease, we can prevent vision loss and preserve our quality of life.



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