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Five Tips for Diabetics On Eye Health

For diabetics, managing diabetes can help the quality of your sight

One in 11 Americans has diabetes - nearly 30 million people - and the number increases to one in four for people over the age of 65.

With diabetes, excessive blood sugar levels leave a sticky coating on red blood cells. The hemoglobin cells become more rigid and impair normal circulation, which causes cholesterol to build up in blood vessels.

Over time, diabetes can cause serious damage to the eyes, as a gradual rise in blood pressure causes damage to blood vessels, particularly in the most fragile and vulnerable blood vessels in of the retina.

Diabetes can cause symptoms in some people and no symptoms in others. Blurred vision over a few weeks' time may bring someone into the eye doctor's office, leaving with a diabetes diagnosis.

High blood sugar readings over a long period of time are a common sign of diabetes. It can cause changes in the lens of the eye, and in turn, someone's sight. Eye doctors sometimes provide the patient with the first clue that blood sugar levels are amiss, because occasionally, even though the patient's vision might not be affected, the optometrist discovers bleeding in the back of the eye during a dilated retina exam.

Diabetes is a chronic disease without a cure, so far. And more than half of diabetics develop diabetic retinopathy, which permanently damages retina tissue - tissue that cannot regenerate. It's the leading cause of irreversible vision loss in developed countries, and one of the three leading causes of vision loss in the elderly.

With most treatments focusing on

keeping blood sugar levels as close to normal as possible, here are five things to think about if you have diabetes, or want to pass along to a friend or loved one who has diabetes:

1. Exercise. Regular exercise improves circulation throughout the body, including the eyes, and helps regulate blood sugar, among many other benefits. As little as 20 minutes of walking per day is proven to provide benefits to people who have diabetes.

2. Healthy diet. A healthy diet - one rich in vegetables and fresh fruits - is key to diabetes management. People with diabetes should eat small healthy meals throughout the day to keep their blood sugar at a consistent level.

3. Not smoking. While there are many reasons for not smoking, the main reason for people with diabetes not to smoke is damage to blood vessels. Blood vessels in a person with diabetes are compromised by high blood pressure, and smoking accelerates damage to blood vessels. It's a dangerous combination for delicate blood vessels in the retina.

4. Understand where blood sugar levels should be. People with diabetes should see their primary care physician and endocrinologist on a regular basis. Diabetics should have a good understanding of how to manage their blood sugar. In addition to what the numbers say, diabetics sometimes guide their lifestyle decisions on how they feel. Their blood sugar might reach 300 but they feel okay, or it may dip to 90 and they skip a meal. This kind of informal management is a bad idea: Diabetics need to understand where their level should be and how to get there.

5. More frequent exams. For diabetics, frequent eye exams can lead to early detection of changes happening in the back of the eye, called retinopathy. More frequent exams are also recommended for people who have already developed retinopathy. Laser surgery for those with early signs of retinopathy has been shown to be effective, reducing severe vision loss by 50 percent.

The longer someone has diabetes, the higher the risk for complications. Diabetics who have been living with this condition for decades need to change to a healthier lifestyle, which leads to less complications and makes it easier to deal with the changes to the body that regularly occur with age.

Finally, damage to blood vessels builds over time, which puts vision at risk. With adequate blood sugar control, a healthy lifestyle, and regular eye exams, diabetics can take the proper steps to protect their eyes and vision.

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