The Quiet Epidemic: Why People With Diabetes Lose Their Sight

(NAPS)—For the nearly 40 million Americans living with diabetes, the threat to their vision unfolds quietly, often without warning. Diabetic retinopathy, a complication that damages blood vessels in the retina, has become the leading cause of blindness among working-age adults in the United States. Yet what makes this epidemic particularly tragic is that it doesn't have to be this way.

"The vast majority of severe vision loss from diabetic retinopathy is preventable," said Janice C. Law, MD, retina specialist in Tennessee. "Studies show that regular eye examinations and timely interventions can reduce the risk of severe vision loss by 90 percent."

Still, many Americans are falling through the cracks. Only about 60 percent of people with diabetes receive the annual dilated eye examinations recommended by the American Academy of Ophthalmology, a shortfall driven by lack of access, awareness, and time.

Expanding Access to Care

If you or someone you care about has diabetes, schedule a dilated eye exam today. Uninsured or underinsured? See if you qualify for a no out-of-pocket cost medical eye exam through EyeCare America®. This public service program matches volunteer ophthalmologists, physicians who specialize in medical and surgical eye care, with eligible patients aged 18 and older who need eye care. Visit www.aao.org/eyecare-america to learn more.

When to See a Doctor

In its early stages, diabetic retinopathy often presents no symptoms at all—a fact that underscores the importance of preventive screening rather than waiting for problems to emerge.

"Even if your vision seems fine, a yearly dilated eye exam is important," said Dr. Law. "By the time patients notice flashing lights, blurred vision, floating spots, or other warning signs, the disease may have already progressed significantly."

When should a person with diabetes have an eye exam?

If you have type 1 diabetes, you should have eye examinations at least yearly beginning 5 years after being diagnosed with diabetes. Your ophthalmologist may recommend more frequent examinations.



People with diabetes are particularly at risk for vision problems and should see an eye doctor regularly.

If you have type 2 diabetes, you should see an ophthalmologist at least yearly as soon you are diagnosed, regardless of your age. Follow your eye doctor's recommendation about how often you should be rechecked, as this varies for every individual. You may need to have your eyes checked more often than once a year.

But diabetes isn't the only reason to see an ophthalmologist. All healthy adults should have a comprehensive eye exam by age 40 when early signs of cataract, glaucoma, and age-related macular degeneration may begin to emerge.

"Forty is typically when subtle signs of eye disease begin to emerge," Laura C. Fine, MD, chair of EyeCare America, explained. "Many times, people don't even notice any changes to their vision during these early phases of disease. However, vision-saving treatments are most effective when the disease is caught early."

The Treatment Gap

Ophthalmologists have more tools than ever before for diagnosing and treating eye diseases. But these innovations cannot help patients whose disease goes undiagnosed or who remain unaware of their condition's severity.

The message is clear: The technology to save sight exists. What's needed now is making sure that everyone who needs it can access it in time.

If you're uninsured or underinsured, EyeCare America may be able to help you, too. See if you qualify for a no out-of-pocket cost medical eye exam at www.aao.org/eyecare-america.