

# Diabetic Retinopathy

## Patient Information Sheet

### Diabetes and eyes

Diabetic retinopathy can affect anyone who has diabetes, whether they are being treated with insulin, tablets or diet only. Generally, retinopathy has no obvious symptoms until it is well advanced. This is why annual eye examinations are so important for everyone with diabetes. Early detection is the key to successful treatment.

### What is retinopathy?

Diabetic retinopathy affects the blood vessels supplying the retina - the sensitive film at the back of the eye. Blood vessels can become blocked, leak or grow haphazardly. This affects the way the retina receives images and, if left untreated, can damage vision.

### Why is my vision blurred?

Blurred vision is not usually a sign of retinopathy, but is common at the time of being diagnosed with diabetes or just afterwards. The high level of glucose (sugar) in the blood can cause blurred vision at this time. After diagnosis and treatment, blood glucose levels may take some weeks to settle down, but once they are under control, vision will return to normal.

### How can I protect my eyes?

The best defence against retinopathy is to have an eye examination when diabetes is diagnosed and once a year after that, as part of the annual diabetes review. It is also vital to ensure that blood sugar and blood pressure are maintained under good control

No change in the vision does not necessarily mean there is no retinopathy. Retinopathy usually has no symptoms until it is well advanced, and by this time treatment is more difficult and far less effective.

### **What does a diabetic eye examination involve?**

A proper eye examination involves much more than reading letters off a wall chart. People with diabetes need to have both retinas examined.

In this eye examination, the person checking the eyes may use an ophthalmoscope to view the retina or take a permanent picture with a camera. An optometrist, ophthalmologist, diabetic physician or a family doctor with a special interest and knowledge of diabetes may do this.

They will first dilate (widen) the pupils using special eye drops. This allows a clearer view of the retina. They may also use a larger instrument with a bright light, together with a small hand-held lens.

The drops used to dilate the pupils can sting a little. If the vision is affected, driving and going back to work should be avoided for a few hours afterwards. The eyes will also be sensitive to bright light for a while, so wearing sunglasses may help.

Remember - people with diabetes can have this examination for free.

### **What is the treatment for retinopathy?**

If the retinopathy worsens, referral to a hospital eye department may be necessary for further assessment.

In a small number of cases, a laser is used to stabilise the retina and seal the leaking blood vessels to preserve the vision. This is done at the outpatients department of the eye clinic.