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IAPB Briefing Paper

Diabetes – Related Eye Conditions: Key Messages



International Agency for the
Prevention of Blindness



Diabetes – related eye complications are common. If left untreated, they lead to the deterioration of vision and, ultimately, blindness.

KEY FACTS

- Diabetes increases the risk of blindness by a factor of 25. Vision can be lost from diabetic retinopathy, cataract and other conditions of the retina and optic nerve.
- Diabetic retinopathy is the leading cause of vision loss among the working age population (20 to 65 years) in industrialised countries¹. Prevalence is escalating in a number of developing countries.
- Once vision has been lost from diabetic retinopathy it cannot usually be reversed, apart from by complex surgery.
- In India, there are 5 million people with diabetic retinopathy. This figure may triple by 2020².
- Around three quarters of people who have diabetes for 10 years or more will develop some form of diabetic retinopathy.
- Left untreated, 25% of people with diabetic macular oedema will develop vision loss within 3 years.
- Estimates of the rate of annual eye exams vary greatly by country and study, but the rate of examination is generally fairly low, even in industrialized countries (from 40 to 65 %). There is no systematic process in place for examining the eyes of diabetics in the majority of countries.

KEY MESSAGES

- Everyone with diabetes is at risk, and the vast majority will, given enough time, develop diabetic retinopathy.
- Severe vision loss, and blindness, is one of the most disabling complications of diabetes.
- Unlike other complications, 98% of blindness caused by DR can be prevented by timely laser treatment.

¹ International Diabetes Federation: Fact Sheets: Diabetes and eye disease. <http://www.idf.org/fact-sheets/diabetes-eye-disease>

² LV Prasad Eye Institute, Hyderabad, India: Diabetic Retinopathy, General Information. <http://www.lvpei.org>

- People with diabetes need annual eye examinations to determine if they need laser or other treatment.
- It is vital that regular eye examinations are an integral part of the health care of diabetics, and that these processes are fully integrated into the health system.
- Eye care professionals should be fully involved in the design of strategies to address diabetes, and involved in the training of health workers, particularly, including, importantly, at the primary care level.
- The current international focus on Non Communicable Diseases (NCDs) provides a unique opportunity to review national strategies to ensure that treatment of all aspects of diabetes is comprehensive, and inclusive.

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