



Eye care for people with diabetes

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Did you know that you can lose your sight due to diabetes? Diabetic eye disease is a condition that affects eyes of people with diabetes due to unbalanced sugar levels in the body.

This can affect different parts of the eye, including the retina, macula, lens and the optic nerve leading to diabetic retinopathy, diabetic macular edema, cataract,

and glaucoma. All forms of diabetic eye disease can cause severe vision loss and blindness according to Dr Grace Ssali, a consultant ophthalmologist at Mulago hospital.

Anyone with either Type 1 or Type 2 diabetes is at risk of developing diabetic retinopathy. However, Type 1 has a slower progression than Type 2.

"When diagnosed with diabetes, you must go for an extensive eye checkup in order to find out the extent of damage and prevent any further infection to the eye.

The longer one lives with diabetes, the higher the risk of developing diabetic eye diseases," says Dr Ssali.

The diseases

According to Dr Febin KM, an ophthalmologist at Dr Agarwal's Eye Hospital, Retinopathy affects blood vessels in the retina, the light-sensitive tissue that lines the back of the eye.

It is one of the commonest causes of vision loss among people with diabetes and

can lead to total blindness if not treated on time.

Cataract: This is a clouding of the eye's lens and is twice more likely to affect people with diabetes than those without. Dr Febin says: "Cataract tends to develop at an earlier age in people with diabetes when the vessels leak a fluid into the eye. The fluid, containing dead cells, clouds the lens thereby causing cataract."

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Glaucoma: It is a group of diseases that damage the eye's optic nerve which connects the eye to the brain. Some types of glaucoma are associated with elevated pressure inside the eye. Diabetes causes a type of glaucoma where the abnormal blood vessels grow in the eye and block normal drainage of the eye.

"An imbalance of sugar levels in the body causes damage of blood vessels on the retina. The retina thereafter manufactures new, abnormal blood vessels. Neovascular glaucoma occurs when the new blood vessels grow on the iris stopping fluid flow in the eye and raising the eye pressure," he remarks.

Diabetic macular edema: This is a result of diabetic retinopathy which leads to swelling in an area of the retina called the macula.

How it happens

Over time, the blood vessels in the retina of a diabetic person become thicker and blood flow slows down. This causes the blood vessels to become fragile so they swell or bleed and leak into the eye.

Dr Febin says: "The vessels can close, stopping blood from passing through yet blood acts as food for the eye. So, when the supply is stopped, visual impairment is likely to occur and if not treated immediately, the sight may totally be damaged and reversal may be impossible."

Sometimes the blood vessels are totally blocked and abnormal new blood vessels try to grow on the retina. The abnormal vessels continuously leak into the eye and this too can snip your vision.

Presentation

At the onset, diabetic retinopathy



Managing diabetic eye disease

Prevention is better than cure. If diagnosed with diabetes, ensure that you control your blood sugar to avoid further eye damage. NET PHOTO

may not be noticed but as tiny blood vessels within the retina leak blood or fluid, the leaking fluid causes the retina to swell or to form deposits in the eye. Many diabetes patients suffer from this condition.

Dr Ssali says: "After some time, the deposits increase in number to form specks or spots floating in your vision. This is a more advanced stage of diabetic eye disease which leads to growth of abnormal new blood vessels on the retina and optic nerve."

If they only bleed a little, you may notice some dark floaters. If they bleed a lot, vision may be blocked. The new blood vessels can form scar tissue which may cause problems with the macula or lead to a detached retina.

Treatment plan

The type of treatment one undergoes depends on how long the problem has stayed and what the ophthalmologist



A nurse carries out an examination. It is good to have a medical checkup if you suspect you might have diabetes. PHOTO BY RACHEL MABALA

Doctor tips

Dr Grace Ssali, a consultant ophthalmologist at Mulago hospital gives the following tips:

- Talk to your primary care doctor about controlling your blood sugar.
- If you have high blood pressure or kidney problems, make sure they are treated because they, too, can

damage your eyesight.

- Have a routine check with an ophthalmologist for dilated eye exam once diagnosed with diabetes. Diabetic retinopathy may be found before you even notice any vision problems.
- If you notice vision changes in one or both eyes, visit an ophthalmologist immediately. This is the best way to prevent vision loss.

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THE APPROXIMATE COST OF EYE SURGERY IN UGANDA.

observes in the eyes. Treatment options for diabetic eye diseases according to Dr Ssali are costly. Therefore, prevention is best.

An injection in the eye to stop further damage costs about Sh51m and depending on the severity, one may require two or three in an interval of one month. In Uganda, Eye surgery can be done at Dr Agarwal's Eye Hospital and Mengo Hospital at a cost of Sh8m.

A combination of diabetes and high blood pressure aggravate eye health and can lead to vision loss. Controlling your blood pressure keeps your eye's blood vessels healthy.

"Follow a diet recommended by a nutritionist and take your medication on time. Sometimes, if sugar levels are well controlled, vision can be restored," Dr Febin advises.

Laser surgery can help seal off leaking blood vessels thereby reducing swelling of the retina. It shrinks blood vessels and prevents them from growing again but more than one treatment is needed.

CARING FOR YOUR EYES

Taking proper care of your eyes is very essential for maintaining good vision. Diabetic patients having higher risk of losing vision, need special and extra efforts to protect their eyes.

- Have a thorough eye examination by an expert eye care professional when you are first diagnosed with diabetes.

- Only an expert eye specialist can an examination of your eyes by dilating them, to have a clear picture of your retina.

- If retinopathy is detected, you will need to have your eyes examined more often.

- Notify your eye care professional immediately if you notice any changes in your vision.

- Keep your blood glucose levels, HbA 1c, blood pressure and cholesterol at recommended levels. High blood glucose, cholesterol and blood pressure increase the risk of eye damage and affect its severity.

- Have regular health checks including blood pressure readings, cholesterol measurements and kidney function tests as recommended by your healthcare team.

- Quit smoking as soon as possible.

- Maintain a lifestyle that includes regular physical activity and healthy eating to better manage your blood glucose levels.

- Always take your medications as instructed by your doctor.

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