

Overview

Diabetic retinopathy

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Diabetic retinopathy is a serious eye disease linked to diabetes.

It happens when high blood glucose levels damage the back of the eye (retina). It can affect your eyesight and cause blindness if left undiagnosed and untreated.

It can take years for diabetic retinopathy to affect your sight.

To reduce this risk:

- control your blood glucose levels, blood pressure and cholesterol
- go to your [Diabetic RetinaScreen](#) appointments so any problems can be found and treated early

Your GP or healthcare professional can refer you for diabetic retina screening by calling freephone [1800 45 45 55](#).

You can also [fill in a registration form online](#). You will need to print this form out and get it signed by your GP.

How diabetes can affect eyes

The retina is the light-sensitive layer of cells at the back of your eye. It converts light into electrical signals. The signals are sent to the brain which turns them into the images you see.

The retina needs a constant supply of blood. It gets this through a network of tiny blood vessels.

Over time, high blood glucose levels caused by type 1 or type 2 diabetes can damage these blood vessels. This happens in 3 main stages.

Stage 1: Background retinopathy

Tiny swellings develop in the blood vessels. These may bleed slightly but do not usually affect your vision.

Stage 2: Pre-proliferative retinopathy

More severe and widespread changes affect the blood vessels. These include more significant bleeding into the eye.

Stage 3: Proliferative retinopathy

Scar tissue and new blood vessels, which are weak and bleed easily, develop on the retina. This can result in some loss of vision.

If retinopathy is found early, lifestyle changes and treatment can stop it getting worse.

Risk of diabetic retinopathy

Anyone with type 1 or type 2 diabetes can get diabetic retinopathy.

You're more at risk if you:

- have had diabetes for a long time
- have a persistently high blood glucose level
- have high blood pressure
- have high cholesterol
- develop a serious illness such as sepsis or pneumonia
- [are pregnant](#)
- are of Asian or Afro-Caribbean background

Reduce your risk of diabetic retinopathy

You can reduce your risk of developing diabetic retinopathy, or help stop it getting worse, by:

- controlling your blood glucose, blood pressure and cholesterol levels
- taking your diabetes medicine as prescribed
- attending all your screening appointments
- getting medical advice quickly if you notice any changes to your vision
- maintaining a healthy weight
- eating a [healthy balanced diet](#), [being physically active](#) and [stopping smoking](#)

[Prevent diabetic retinopathy](#)

Symptoms of diabetic retinopathy

You will not usually notice diabetic retinopathy in the early stages. There may not be any signs or

symptoms until it's more advanced.

Early signs can be picked up during diabetic eye screening.

Contact your doctor or diabetes care team if you have:

- a gradual decline in your vision
- sudden vision loss
- shapes floating in your vision (floaters)
- blurred or patchy vision
- eye pain or redness

Do not wait until your next screening appointment.

These symptoms do not mean you have diabetic retinopathy. But it's important to get them checked out.

Treatment for diabetic retinopathy

Treatment is only necessary if screening shows your vision is at risk.

The main treatments for more advanced diabetic retinopathy are:

- laser treatment
- injections of medicine into your eyes
- an operation to remove blood or scar tissue from your eyes

[Treatment for diabetic retinopathy](#)

If you do not need treatment, continue to manage your diabetes.

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