

Diabetes and your health

Helping care for your eyes



Diabetes and eye disease

Introducing Elena

Elena works part-time and is busy planning her daughter's wedding. Elena has had diabetes for 10 years. Overall, she takes good care of her diabetes. She eats right and walks at least 3 days each week for exercise. She also takes her diabetes medicines as recommended by her healthcare provider.



Elena has diabetes but does not know that she may have eye disease without any symptoms.

Elena *does not go* for regular eye exams. She knows diabetes may increase her chances for eye disease, but going to the eye doctor seems like one more thing to do. She thinks her eyes are fine. The information on the following pages could be useful to help Elena better understand her risk.

Learning how to take care of your eyes

It takes time and work each day to manage your diabetes:

- You may have to take medicine.
- You have to check your blood sugar.
- You also have to take care of your eyes.

There are steps you can take that may help to prevent or delay serious health problems linked to diabetes.

What is eye disease?

If you have diabetes, your chances for having certain eye diseases increase over time. These diseases may limit your vision or cause blindness. Three common eye diseases associated with diabetes are:

| Eye disease | Definition |
|--|--|
| Diabetic retinopathy (die-uh-BET-ik ret-ih-NOP-uh-thee) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The weakening of or damage to the tiny blood vessels at the back of the eye. Blood may leak into the retina. |
| Glaucoma (glau-KO-ma) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The buildup of pressure in the eye. This reduces blood flow to parts of the eye, leading to gradual vision loss. |
| Cataracts (CAT-uh-rakts) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The clouding of the lens in the eye. |

Getting your eyes checked

The American Diabetes Association recommends that people with diabetes get comprehensive eye exams by your eye doctor.

Eye exam guidelines

- **Type 1 diabetes:** Yearly exams should start within 5 years of diagnosis.
- **Type 2 diabetes:** If you have signs of diabetic retinopathy, yearly eye exams should start right after diagnosis. If you do not have signs of diabetic retinopathy, your healthcare provider may schedule exams every 2 years.



Find eye disease early

In the early stages, eye diseases may not have symptoms. Even though the damage has started, you may still see fine. Once the disease gets worse, you may have some vision loss, even blindness. Early treatment, however, may help to reduce your chances of vision loss.

Ask your healthcare provider about your risks for eye disease and ways you can manage it.

Prepare for your exam by answering the questions below about common risk factors. If you answer “Yes” or are unsure about any of the questions, talk about this with your doctor at your next appointment.

| Risk factors* | Yes | No |
|---|-----|----|
| Have you had diabetes for a long time? | | |
| Do you often have high blood sugar? | | |
| Do you often have high blood pressure? | | |
| Do you have high cholesterol? | | |
| Are you pregnant? | | |
| Do you use tobacco products? | | |
| Are you African American, Hispanic, or Native American? | | |

*Ask your healthcare provider for your target numbers for blood sugar, blood pressure, and cholesterol.

What is a comprehensive eye exam?

A comprehensive eye exam is a complete eye checkup done by an eye doctor, such as an optometrist (op-TOM-oh-trist) or an ophthalmologist (of-thal-MOL-oh-jist). It is a thorough exam to detect disease and damage, such as diabetic retinopathy. Diabetic retinopathy is swelling of the tiny blood vessels in the retina (at the back of the eye). This swelling can get worse over time. There may be no signs of retinopathy until there is vision loss.



Below are four common eye exams:

| Exam type | What happens during this test? |
|---|---|
| Visual acuity test | You read an eye chart to measure how well you see at various distances. |
| Dilated eye exam | Drops are placed in your eyes to make your pupils larger. Your eye doctor uses a special lens to examine the back of your eye. |
| Eye pressure test, called a tonometry (toe-NOM-uh-tree) | Drops may be placed in your eyes to numb them. Your eye doctor may use a tool or a puff of air on the surface of your eye to measure the pressure. |
| Slit-lamp exam | A small light is used during this exam to allow the doctor to see different parts of the eye. Dye drops may be used to help the doctor see tiny signs of damage to the eye. |

Do you get your eyes checked?

Here are some common reasons people give for not getting comprehensive eye exams. Consider the patient concerns below and the food for thought for each statement. Talk about any concerns you may have with your eye doctor.



Patient: *I can see fine.*

Food for thought: At first, eye disease may not have any symptoms. You may not notice any changes in your eyesight. Finding disease early may help to prevent further damage.

Patient: *My diabetes already takes a lot of time to manage. It is hard to think about doing one more thing.*

Food for thought: All people with diabetes need to get a comprehensive eye exam as often as their healthcare provider suggests. Getting your eyes checked is one way to help protect your sight.

Patient: *I cannot afford any more medical expenses.*

Food for thought: Some health plans may cover comprehensive eye exams for people with diabetes. Call your insurance provider to get the name of an eye doctor who can do the exam for you.

Patient: *My vision will be blurred for a few hours after the exam. I am not sure how I can get home.*

Food for thought: Plan for a way to get home. For example, you can ask a family member or friend to give you a ride.

Patient: *I am worried the exam will be painful or uncomfortable.*

Food for thought: The exam is not painful for most people, but you may feel some discomfort. Your eyes may be sensitive to light for a few hours. It may help to bring sunglasses or dark glasses with you.

Patient: *I am afraid the doctor will find something wrong with my eyes.*

Food for thought: Treating small problems early may reduce your chances for serious eye disease later.

Patient: *I just saw an eye doctor who gave me a prescription for new eyeglasses or contact lenses. My eyes must be fine.*

Food for thought: Did the eye doctor do a comprehensive eye exam to check for eye disease? This exam is different from the one for an eyeglass or contact lens prescription.

Patient: *I know it is important, but I have trouble remembering to make the appointment each year.*

Food for thought: Always call at the same time each year. Pick some special time that is easy for you to remember. Or ask the eye doctor to send you a reminder card.

Making your appointment

Life is busy. Going to the eye doctor may not be on your mind, but when eye disease is caught early, your healthcare provider may be able to treat it. Remember to ask at your next office visit when you should make your next eye appointment.

The steps below can help you get the most from your appointment:

STEP 1 Some health plans may cover comprehensive eye exams for people with diabetes. Ask your insurance provider for the name of an eye doctor who is covered under your plan. Write the doctor's name and telephone number here:

Dr. Name: _____

Phone Number: _____

Address: _____

STEP 2 Call your eye doctor. Write your appointment date and time here:

Date: _____ Time: _____

STEP 3 Prepare for your appointment.

- Be sure to bring a list of all the medicines you take.
- Bring sunglasses or dark glasses with you. If you can, make plans to have someone drive you home.

STEP 4 During your appointment. Your eye doctor will likely use eye drops to dilate your eyes. This may make your vision blurry and sensitive to light. It may help to wear sunglasses or to wait until your vision is clear before driving.

STEP 5 Discuss the results. After your exam, ask the eye doctor to send the results to your primary care physician. Talk about the results at your next visit.

Getting back to Elena.

Once Elena understood the risk and importance, she made an appointment for her eye exam. She wants to help protect her sight. She has places to go and a wedding to plan.

During her eye exam, the eye doctor found early signs of eye disease. Now Elena works with her healthcare provider to help prevent more damage. She is making sure her blood sugar, cholesterol, and blood pressure are managed. She is doing her best to continue with a healthy lifestyle. Elena is relieved that she found out about her eye problems early and is glad she took steps to take care of herself.



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**Learn more about eye
disease and diabetes**

**American Diabetes
Association**

www.diabetes.org
1-800-DIABETES
(1-800-342-2383)

National Eye Institute

[www.nei.nih.gov/health/
diabetic](http://www.nei.nih.gov/health/diabetic)
1-301-496-5248