



Clinic Focuses on the Connection Between Eye Health and Diabetes

Some people think the eyes are the windows to the soul. But ask an ophthalmologist, and they'll likely tell you the eyes are the windows to the health of the rest of the body.

◀ Ana Lucía Flores, MD

Dr. Ana Flores, of Memphis Eye Clinic, is one such ophthalmologist. She specializes in conditions affecting the retina, including diabetic retinopathy.

It's not news that diabetes is an epidemic in the United States. The statistics are staggering: 29 million American adults and children have diabetes, and undiagnosed cases account for more than 8 million of all cases. That's scary stuff considering that diabetes is a leading cause of blindness in adults.

ABOUT DIABETIC RETINOPATHY

There are two types of diabetic retinopathy: nonproliferative (in the early stages) and proliferative (more advanced). Both are inflammatory diseases that can damage the blood vessels in the eye and that are caused by uncontrolled high levels of glucose in the bloodstream.

In nonproliferative retinopathy, those blood vessels can leak blood and other fluids, causing retinal tissue to swell. If left untreated, such swelling can cause permanent blindness. Proliferative retinopathy can also prompt the growth and breakage of abnormal blood vessels, causing vitreous hemorrhages. Accompanying scarring can cause retinal detachment.

TREATMENT OPTIONS

"With diabetic retinopathy, the key is systemic control of diabetes," says Flores. "Diet is especially effective in this regard."

Flores recommends that patients limit carbohydrates and eliminate processed foods to improve fasting blood sugar.

"Regular exercise," she says, "is another powerful intervention in the fight against diabetes. Weight training, in particular, helps the body dispose of glucose naturally."

Flores believes so strongly in the link between eye health and diet and exercise

that she employs a board-certified holistic nutritionist, Aaron Harris, in her practice. Harris notes that in the last 25 years diabetes diagnoses have increased almost 400 percent, "a trend concurrent with the increase of processed food consumption and rise in obesity.

"There are certainly medications available to help control blood sugar, but I

retinopathy," Flores says. "This treatment is effective, and the risks are minimal."

People who have been diagnosed should visit an eye doctor as soon as possible, according to Flores. And if she suspects diabetes is an undiagnosed cause of a patient's retinopathy, she'll direct the patient to see his or her primary care physician immediately.



prefer patients first employ the true power of diet and exercise."

Traditionally, people with either type of diabetic retinopathy were treated with surgery or laser treatments. Flores says patients can now be treated with intraocular injections of steroids or other medications called anti-VEGFs to target inflammation or the growth of abnormal blood vessels.

"It's a treatment that's only been available for about five years, and it takes less than five minutes, but it has revolutionized how we treat advanced

"If diabetes' effects on the eyes are severe," she says, "other organs are likely being affected as well."



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