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DIABETES AND THE EYE

Diabetes is the most common cause of blindness in the working age-group.

It can affect the eyes in many ways, on both a short term and long term basis. People with diabetes are often first diagnosed by their opticians, as the back of the eye can show a lot about someone's health. In conjunction with the view of the back of the eye, common symptoms such as needing to go to the toilet more often, feeling more tired than usual and feeling thirsty or craving a sweet treat can often lead to a referral for assessment for diabetes.

Diabetes affects circulation, and two of the common parts of the body to be affected are the feet and the eyes.

On a short term basis, as the blood sugar levels vary, a person's prescription can actually change, with comments such as 'I can see to read without my glasses where I never could before' or 'sometimes I can see writing on the television but other times its blurry'.

On a more long term basis, diabetes, especially when badly managed, can give rise to a greater risk of cataracts, glaucoma and haemorrhages at the back of the eyes.

There are different types of retinopathy – damage to the back of the eye. There is background retinopathy, where small haemorrhages, known as dot and blot haemorrhages are scattered across the back of the retina. As long as these are not in a sensitive region, they are often left to get better on their own. Proliferative retinopathy is where the blood supply at the back of the eyes is damaged to such an extent that new blood vessels grow and more and/or larger haemorrhages can be seen. Commonly, these are treated with a laser to cauterise the leaking blood vessels. This form of treatment can, however, leave a permanent scar at the site of application of the laser.

Obviously, it is crucial to manage the condition well. Maintaining a good diet, lots of exercise and no binging on sweet snacks will go a long way to preventing damage to the eyes and the body in general. A regular check up for the eyes is always a good thing. In the case of people with diabetes, an annual check up is strongly advised, even if all seems to be well.