



For Immediate Release

November 3, 2004

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Obesity in Children Can Lead to Diabetes and Vision Problems

Diabetic Retinopathy often leads to blindness if not treated early

Diabetes is the sixth deadliest disease in the United States and the leading cause of blindness for persons under age 74 in the Western World. In particular, Type 2 diabetes (formerly known as “adult-onset diabetes”) has increased at alarming rates over the last decade. Amazingly, Type 2 diabetes in children and adolescents is now recognized as an epidemic throughout the U.S. and other parts of the world. Optometrists fear that a whole new generation is at risk for developing diabetic retinopathy as a result of Type 2 diabetes caused by obesity.

“Type 2 diabetes in children, especially those who are overweight and under-active, is becoming rampant,” said Dr. Paul Chous from the Optometric Physicians of Washington (OPW) and author of *Diabetic eye disease: lessons from a diabetic eye doctor – how to avoid blindness and get great eye care*. According to the American Diabetes Association (ADA), this trend is linked directly to the rise in obesity, with 80 to 90 percent of all Type 2 diabetics being obese. “There is great concern that these children will develop diabetic retinopathy and other complications of diabetes if they are not diagnosed and treated early,” said Chous. “Even more important is preventing Type 2 diabetes in both overweight adults and children.”

Diabetic retinopathy is a general term used for bleeding and swelling of the eye’s light-sensitive retina caused by diabetes. Risk factors include blood sugar control, blood pressure levels, how long you have had diabetes and family history. Retinopathy can lead to blindness.

The longer a person has diabetes, the greater the chance he or she will develop diabetic retinopathy which can lead to blindness. According to the American Optometric Association (AOA), research shows that after 10 years, 60 percent of diabetics will have some degree of retinopathy; after 20 years, 90 percent will. Very often, patients with vision threatening retinopathy have 20/20 visual acuity and no symptoms whatsoever.

“Type 2 diabetes has been known, up to this point, as ‘adult-onset diabetes’ because patients often did not develop signs of the disease until they were in their 40’s or 50’s. With the average progression of diabetic retinopathy, people weren’t developing the disease until their 60’s or

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70s. Children who develop Type 2 diabetes when they are 10 or 15 could start developing symptoms of diabetic retinopathy in their twenties or thirties, dramatically increasing their chances to go blind from the disease,” said Chous.

Recently, the Diabetes Prevention Program (DPP) showed that the risk of developing Type 2 diabetes could be reduced in at-risk persons by nearly 60% through changes in lifestyle, most importantly 30 minutes of physical activity (e.g. brisk walking) performed 5 day per week. “Preventing Type 2 diabetes in both kids and adults boils down to actively moving your body on a regular basis,” emphasized Dr. Chous.

The Optometric Physicians of Washington recommend a yearly comprehensive vision exam for all patients, especially children, to check for vision problems related to Type 2 diabetes as well as other eye conditions. “The eye is a gateway to see into the human body. Optometric physicians are often able to see signs of health problems that affect all parts of the body and direct patients to a specialist if we suspect a problem,” said Chous. “A yearly vision exam is not only good for your eyes, but for your health in general.”

Visit www.eyes.org for more information on diabetic retinopathy, its symptoms and how to prevent it.

The Optometric Physicians of Washington (OPW) is the professional association of Washington State optometric physicians. The OPW is comprised of 13 optometric societies throughout the state numbering approximately 600 private, corporate and HMO optometric physicians.

*The **mission** of the OPW is to advance, improve and enhance the vision care and eye health of the public and to promote the continued development of the profession of optometry.*

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