



For Immediate Release
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Early Detection the Key to Preventing Blindness from Diabetes, Especially for Minorities

VISION USA program now offers year-round, free eye care to qualifying underinsured individuals

Diabetes is much more prevalent among minority populations – specifically African Americans, Native Americans, Mexican Americans and Latino Americans. In addition, diabetic eye disease often shows no early warning signs. Because of this, the Optometric Physicians of Washington urge those at risk for diabetes or with diabetes to get a yearly comprehensive eye examination.

According to the American Diabetes Association, as up to 50 percent of Native Americans have diabetes. Research shows that almost half of the individuals diagnosed with diabetes have some degree of diabetic retinopathy, a potentially blinding condition resulting from the disease. To make matters worse, the frequency of severe visual impairment from diabetes is reported to be 40 percent higher among African Americans.

"Early diabetic retinopathy often has no corresponding symptoms. Therefore, a patient may not notice visual changes until the disease has significantly progressed," says Thomas Riley, O.D., of the Optometric Physicians of Washington. "With early detection, routine monitoring, a medically-supervised program of diet and exercise to control blood-sugar levels and timely treatment with laser surgery, vision can be saved in more than 90 percent of those who would otherwise become blind from the disease. That's why it's important for people with diabetes to have a dilated eye exam at least once a year."

For individuals who cannot afford routine eye care, the Optometric Physicians of Washington just approved their VISION USA program to run on a year-round basis. The program offers free comprehensive eye examinations to working Americans who do not have health insurance by matching qualifying individuals with an optometric physician in their community. Individuals can obtain an application by calling 1-800-766-4466, 7 a.m.- 9 p.m. CST, Monday through Friday.

More

“Because so many in Washington state who have diabetes or are at-risk of the disease are also underinsured, I believe VISION USA is of particular importance to preventing vision loss from diabetes,” says Congressman George Nethercutt, Co-Chair of the bipartisan Congressional Diabetes Caucus. “In addition, national research shows that one-third of those with diabetes don’t even know they have the disease. This makes an eye exam an important avenue for individuals to enter the health care system to detect systemic diseases like diabetes.”

Congressman Nethercutt, whose daughter has diabetes, has particular interest in educating others about preventing and living with diabetes. Congressman Nethercutt is signing a special proclamation being read by Spokane city officials on November 14, World Diabetes Day, at NATIVE Health Clinic of Spokane. NATIVE Health Clinic of Spokane is a non-profit, minority owned and operated organization providing primary health care services to all people, with an expertise in Indian Health.

Diabetic retinopathy is one of a group of eye problems, including cataracts and glaucoma, that may develop as a complication of diabetes. Diabetic retinopathy causes blood vessels in the retina to become fragile, leak fluid, and swell the retina leading to blurred vision. The longer one has diabetes, the greater the chance he or she will develop diabetic retinopathy. Other factors that increase the risk of developing diabetic eye disease include poor control of diabetes, smoking, high blood pressure and pregnancy.

To learn more about diabetic eye disease, or for a referral to the optometric physician nearest you, please call the Optometric Physicians of Washington at 1-800-562-1487 or visit www.eyes.org.

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For more information, ***MEDIA*** may contact (not a contact for general public):
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VISION USA Requirements

To qualify for free eye care under VISION USA, persons must:

- have a job or live in a household where there is one working member at least part time,
- have no health insurance that covers eye examinations,
- have income below an established level based on household size and
- have had no eye examination in the past 24 months. Eligibility thresholds may vary by state.

To receive an application:

- Download an application from www.eyes.org (Click VISION USA link on home page)
- Write to VISION USA, 243 North Lindbergh Blvd, St. Louis, MO 63141
- Call 1-800-766-4466, 7 a.m.- 9 p.m. CST, Monday through Friday
- Ask your local social service agency, DMV office or library

VISION USA is made possible through the American Optometric Association, which administers the program through a grant from Vision Service Plan, Inc.

National Diabetes Initiative

A program for individuals beyond working age and receiving Medicare. A partnership between the American Optometric Association, the American Academy of Ophthalmology, and the Health Care Financing Administration.

- Program for Medicare beneficiaries with diabetes who have not had an eye exam in 2 or 3+ years
- Call American Optometric Association Diabetes Hotline at 1-800-262-3947 to be matched up with a participating physician in your area
- Participating physicians are asked to waive co-pay or deductibles