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## **MILLIONS OF INDIVIDUALS WITH DIABETES AT-RISK FOR BLINDING EYE DISEASE**

**CHICAGO (Nov. 1, 2007)** – More than 6 million Americans have diabetes and don't know it. According to the Mayo Clinic, nearly half of all individuals with diabetes have some form of diabetic retinopathy, a potentially blinding eye disease. And, the number of those with diabetes is skyrocketing with a projected 48 million Americans by the year 2050.

Currently, diabetic retinopathy affects 5.3 million Americans. In addition to the impact that the disease can have on quality of life, diabetic retinopathy costs \$490 million annually in direct costs for outpatient, inpatient and prescription drug services, according to a recent research study by Prevent Blindness America and Johns Hopkins University.

In the early and most treatable stage, called nonproliferative, patients will not likely notice any symptoms or change in vision. If left untreated, patients may enter the proliferative stage with symptoms such as blurred or cloudy vision, an increase in "floaters," or tunnel vision, among others. Untreated diabetic retinopathy can also lead to macular edema, which is the swelling of the macula due to leaking blood vessels. Or, it can lead to retinal detachment, one of the most common causes of blindness in diabetes. This occurs when growing blood vessels pull the retina from the back of the eye.

"The diabetes epidemic is showing no signs of slowing down anytime soon," said Daniel D. Garrett, senior vice president of Prevent Blindness America. "We can't stress enough how imperative it is for those with diabetes to get an annual dilated eye exam to help save their sight."

Prevent Blindness America has declared November as Diabetic Eye Disease Month in an effort to raise awareness about the serious threat to vision that patients with diabetes can face. The group also has created a dedicated Web site, [www.diabetes-sight.org](http://www.diabetes-sight.org), for patients and healthcare professionals to learn more about protecting vision. Individuals with diabetes are 40 percent more likely to develop glaucoma and 60 percent more likely to develop cataracts than those without diabetes.

According to Prevent Blindness America, other risk factors for diabetic eye disease include:

**Age-** Both younger and older people with diabetes are at-risk for diabetic retinopathy.

**Duration of the Disease-** The longer a person has diabetes, the greater the chance of retinopathy. Virtually everyone who was diagnosed with diabetes before age 30 has diabetic retinopathy within 15 years of their diagnosis. About three quarters of those who are diagnosed after age 30 have diabetic retinopathy within 15 years of diagnosis.

**Blood Sugar Control-** Poor blood sugar control is one of the main causes of diabetic retinopathy. Individuals with diabetes can lower the risk of vision loss by carefully monitoring and controlling blood sugar levels. The onset and progression of retinopathy may be slowed by controlling blood sugar levels through a healthy diet, insulin and other drugs.

**Smoking-** Quitting smoking can significantly reduce the risk for diabetic retinopathy.

**Alcohol-** Alcohol and diabetes are a dangerous combination for many reasons, including an increased risk of diabetic retinopathy.

**Hypertension-** High blood pressure increases the risk of eye disease, as well as heart disease, stroke and kidney disease.

**Pregnancy-** While scientists are still unsure why, pregnancy seems to increase a woman's risk of developing, or accelerating, diabetic retinopathy. Pregnant women with diabetes should see their eye doctor during their pregnancy.

For more information on diabetic eye disease, please call Prevent Blindness America at 1-800-331-2020 or visit [www.diabetes-sight.org](http://www.diabetes-sight.org).

### **About Prevent Blindness America**

Founded in 1908, Prevent Blindness America is the nation's leading volunteer eye health and safety organization dedicated to fighting blindness and saving sight. Focused on promoting a continuum of vision care, Prevent Blindness America touches the lives of millions of people each year through public and professional education, advocacy, certified vision screenings, community and patient service programs and research. These services are made possible through the generous support of the American public. Together with a network of affiliates, divisions and chapters, it's committed to eliminating preventable blindness in America. For more information, or to make a contribution to the sight-saving fund, call 1-800-331-2020 or visit us on the Web at [www.preventblindness.org](http://www.preventblindness.org).

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