

essential eyesight special

A view to the future

Diabetes can damage your eyes and, if left unchecked, lead to blindness.

Words Thea O'Connor

When Ros Martin discovered in her early 20s that her failing sight was due to diabetic retinopathy, she thought treatment would save her vision. After almost a year of laser treatment on both her eyes, however, she went completely blind at the age of 24, late in 1989.

Diabetic retinopathy occurs when diabetes (a condition that affects the body's ability to store and use glucose) damages the fine blood vessels that nourish the retina, the seeing part of the eye.

Martin's outcome was unusual. Laser treatment, while unable to restore vision that has been lost, is usually successful in preventing further deterioration in people with diabetic retinopathy.

"I knew there were serious consequences of diabetes, including effects on eyesight, but I didn't think it would happen to me," says Martin, now 42 and a mother of two. She was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes when she was 10.

Sydney ophthalmologist Robert Chong sees many patients with diabetes. "Many say, 'I've done everything right, how come I've got it?' I always ask about their blood pressure as well as their diabetic control, as high blood pressure can make retinopathy worse. Some

degree of retinopathy can be inevitable, even if you take good care of yourself."

Diabetes Australia – NSW estimates that about 1.5 million Australians have diabetes. According to the National Health and Medical Research Council, three out of four diabetics will show mild signs of retinopathy after 15 years and about one in four diabetics will develop advanced retinopathy after 15 years.

It's only when retinopathy becomes advanced that vision is affected. Martin remembers experiencing eyestrain and difficulty focusing a couple of months before she had her eyes examined.

Chong says blurring, difficulty reading, floaters and shadows are other symptoms that can signal advanced retinopathy.

"Don't wait until you have problems as retinopathy can be quite advanced by the time you notice something wrong with your sight," he says. "I want to see people when their vision is good so I can slow down the loss [of sight]. That's why it's really important to have regular eye checks – at least every two years."

More frequent checks are needed if you already have signs of retinopathy, poorly controlled diabetes, type 1 diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol or if you are pregnant.

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Ros Martin

Hindsight . . .
Ros Martin
(above, with
her two sons)
went blind
from diabetic
retinopathy at
the age of 24.
Photo: Vision
Australia.

Preventing the progression of retinopathy in type 1 diabetes, which accounts for about 10 per cent of cases of diabetes and is caused by an inability to produce insulin, can be particularly challenging. "It's a more aggressive form of the disease and poor compliance with treatment [diet and insulin injections] during teenage years is not uncommon," Chong says.

Martin says that while her diabetic control was excellent until the age of 15 and good again in her 20s, she indulged in alcohol, cigarettes and unhealthy food during her late teens.

Type 2 diabetes usually affects people over the age of 30 and accounts for about 90 per cent of cases. The risk of diabetic retinopathy is only slightly reduced for people whose type 2 diabetes is controlled by diet alone, according to the research council. Unhealthy lifestyle behaviours such as weight gain and lack of exercise often trigger the onset of this condition, which occurs when insulin is produced by the body but cannot be used effectively.

Sixty-year-old David Webster was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes when he was 25. He now has advanced retinopathy. "I used to be really fit but from about age 30 I became quite inactive. I've smoked all my

Things to remember

- ❑ Almost everyone with diabetes will develop retinopathy.
- ❑ Good control of diabetes and regular eye examinations can prevent vision loss.
- ❑ Achieving healthy blood pressure and blood cholesterol also helps prevent disease progression.
- ❑ The sooner retinopathy is detected, the better the outcome.

adult life, giving up five years ago. It's hard for me to exercise and lose weight as I lost my leg to gangrene a year ago. I didn't realise diabetes was so dangerous – I used to think you couldn't eat sugar and that was it."

Chong says good blood glucose control can delay the onset and progression of diabetic retinopathy. "A healthy diet, regular exercise, weight control, regular blood glucose monitoring and regular eye checks can make the difference between maintaining sight for life or losing it."

For more information, contact Diabetes Australia – NSW on 1300 136 588.