

## Taking great care of diabetic eyes

5 per cent of Australians have diabetes, and more than 70 percent of people with diabetes will develop diabetes-related eye problems within 15 years of diagnosis. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are 6 times more likely to develop diabetic eye-sight loss. Grim facts indeed, but the good news is that 94% of this vision loss is avoidable and this is where we can all play a key role.

### How does diabetes affect our eyes?

When someone has diabetes, their body is unable to maintain healthy levels of glucose (sugar) in their blood. High blood sugars damage the fine blood vessels of the retina (the light-sensitive film at the back of our eye), which receives images seen by the eye. Fluid can also accumulate in the retina. This is called diabetic retinopathy and there are 2 types: non-proliferative retinopathy and proliferative retinopathy.

### Healthy retina

This is what a normal, healthy retina looks like.



### Non-proliferative retinopathy

The damaged blood vessels leak, causing pools of blood in some areas whilst starving other parts of the retina of blood.



### Proliferative retinopathy

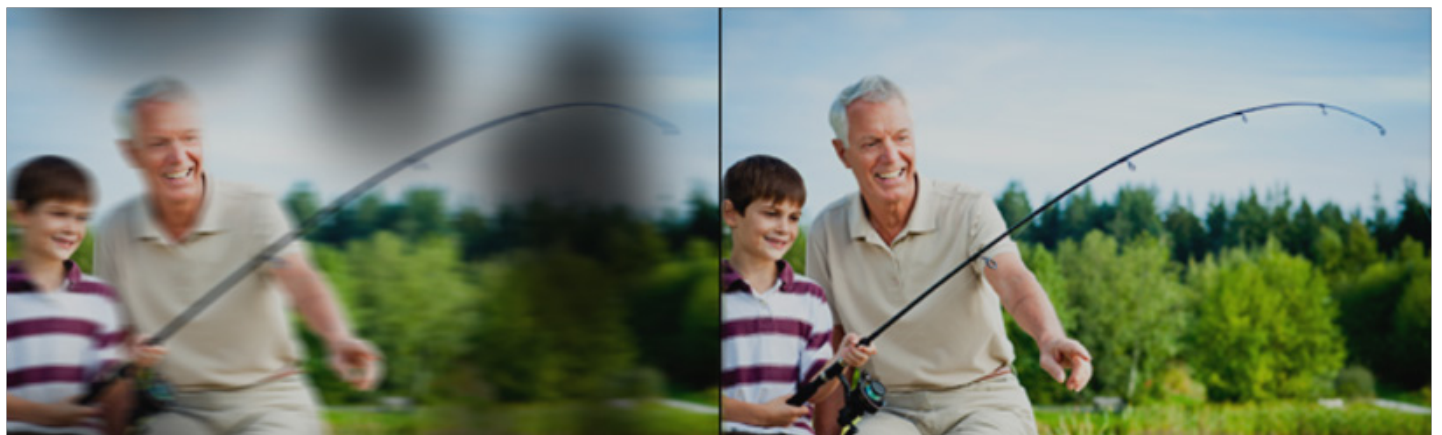
New vessels grow in an attempt to mend the leaks. This requires urgent treatment as significant vision loss can occur quickly.



### What will a patient with diabetes experience and what factors will make it worse?

Whilst they may experience blurred vision and/or fluctuating vision, often there are no symptoms until the disease is severe and an optometrist will often be the first person to pick up that someone has diabetes. Lifestyle choices are critical in ensuring that the disease is managed and eyesight is protected. The chance of problems increases the longer the patient has had diabetes, if blood sugars and high blood pressure is not well controlled, or if the patient is a smoker or is pregnant. Treatment aims to prevent further damage and to keep the best sight possible. If left untreated, it can cause blindness.

What diabetic retinopathy can look like to a sufferer (left) compared to normal vision (right).



### What can you do to help your community?

Prevention is better than a cure, and you can play a critical role in supporting your diabetic patients with their compliance and life-style choices. It's vital that they see the optometrist regularly – encourage them to make an appointment every 2 years, or as advised by the optometrist.