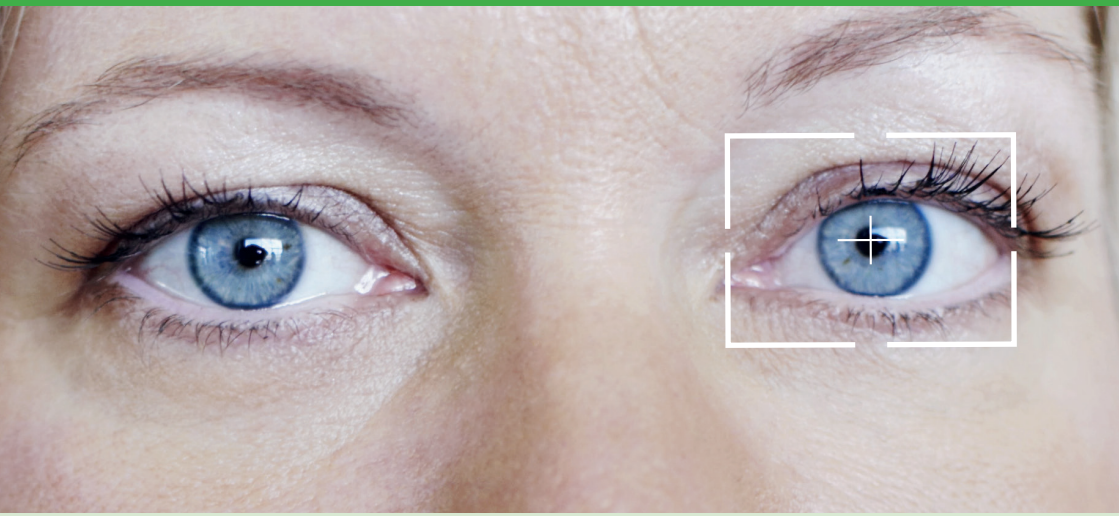
Diabetic Eye Screening

What you need to know

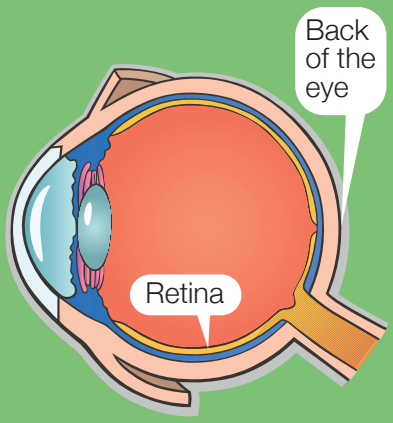


Northern Ireland
Diabetic Eye Screening
Programme

When you have diabetes, arrangements are made for you to attend the Diabetic Eye Screening Programme. This service is free and is a part of your overall diabetes care.

What is diabetic retinopathy?

This occurs when diabetes damages the small blood vessels in the part of the eye called the retina. These blood vessels can become blocked or leaky, affecting how the retina works. Sometimes abnormal new blood vessels grow, which are weak and can bleed easily. In the early stages, these changes will not normally affect your sight. However, if left untreated, the retinopathy may get worse and your vision may be affected.





Why is it important to screen for diabetic retinopathy?

Screening can detect changes in the retina at an early stage, before you are aware of them. If these changes are detected in time, treatment is very effective at preventing sight loss in the majority of people. It is therefore important to have your eyes screened and to attend all screening appointments.

Do all people with diabetes need to be screened?

If you are registered as having diabetes and are aged 12 years or over, you will be invited. The only exception is people who have no light perception in both eyes.

Regardless of how your diabetes is controlled, whether you attend your GP or a hospital consultant, you still need to attend for screening.

I am already going to an eye clinic. Do I still need to attend for screening?

Only people who are already attending a clinic for diabetic retinopathy do not need to be screened. **If you are attending an eye clinic for another condition, you do need to be screened**. If in doubt, talk to your GP or practice nurse.

I am already going to my optometrist (optician). Do I still need to attend for screening?

Yes. It is important that screening is carried out within an organised programme that is closely monitored to make sure it meets national standards.

Will I still need to go to my optometrist?

Yes. The diabetic eye screening programme is designed to detect diabetic retinopathy and maculopathy, not other eye conditions. You should visit your optometrist every year to have your routine sight test. This allows early detection of other eye conditions such as glaucoma or cataract, and assesses your vision for driving. This test is free for people with diabetes.

Can I opt out of diabetic eye screening?

You can opt out of the programme at any stage. An 'opt out' form is available from the screening office at Belfast Health and Social Care Trust on 028 9615 7600. Opting out of screening should only be done after detailed discussion with your GP or diabetic consultant.

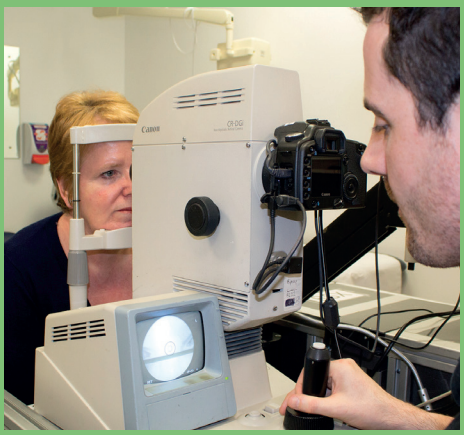
If you opt out of the programme, you will not receive a screening invitation for the next three years, after which time you will be automatically invited again. You can opt back into the screening programme at any stage by contacting the screening office.

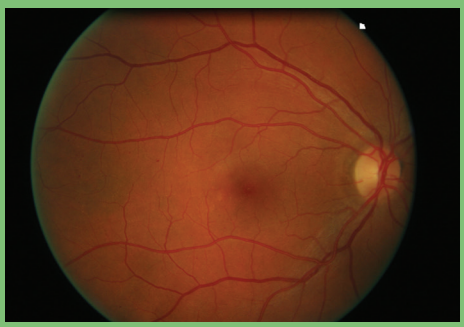
What actually happens at diabetic eye screening?

At the screening appointment, you will have two or more photographs taken of each eye using a special camera. The test is painless and takes about 15 minutes.

Some people with diabetes will need to have drops put in their eyes about 15 minutes before the test to dilate their pupils. This helps us take a good quality photograph.

If this is necessary, it will be discussed with you at your appointment.





Do the eye drops have any adverse effects?

The drops may cause some stinging for a few seconds. After about 15 minutes, your sight will become blurred and it may be difficult to focus on objects near you.

If pupil dilating eye drops are given to you in the eye clinic, you are advised to wait until your vision is clear before driving or operating machinery and this usually takes about four hours.

To drive you should be able to read a car number plate from the distance (20m) required by the Driver Vehicle Licensing Agency.

Very rarely, the drops can cause a sudden rise in pressure within the eye. This is indicated by:

- pain or severe discomfort in or around your eye
- redness in the white of your eye
- worsening or persistent blurred vision a few hours after being screened, sometimes with rainbow halos around lights
- nausea or vomiting.

If you have any of these symptoms, you should be seen immediately by your GP or optometrist, or go to an emergency department. Treatment is very successful and will prevent this happening again in the future.

How will I get my result?

A letter will be sent directly to you and copied to your GP within three weeks. You will not get your result at the end of the test because the photographs will need to be looked at by a specially trained person.

Who else will receive my screening result?

If you attend a hospital diabetes clinic, the result will be available to those providing your care. A copy of the result will also be shared with any hospital eye clinic you attend.

What happens next?

Most people will have a normal screening test and be invited for screening again in 12 or 24 months. However, you will be contacted for further assessment if:

- the photographs are not clear enough to give an accurate reading;
- you have eye changes that need follow-up treatment at a hospital eye clinic;
- other eye conditions are detected by chance, which need investigation.

What should I do if I have any concerns about my eyes between screening appointments?

Do not wait for your next screening appointment. Get advice from your GP or optometrist.



What happens if diabetic retinopathy is detected in my eyes?

Depending on the level of diabetic retinopathy and any sight loss, you may be referred to an eye clinic for further assessment and treatment.

What treatment is there for diabetic retinopathy?

Laser treatment is very effective at preventing sight loss in most people if carried out at the right time. The specialist at the eye clinic will explain this to you.

Whether or not you have diabetic retinopathy, it is always important to maintain good control of your blood glucose levels and blood pressure.

Things to remember about diabetic retinopathy

- It is a treatable condition.
- Screening is important because the early stages of retinopathy usually do not cause any signs or symptoms.
- Everyone with diabetes should have both eyes examined regularly for this condition.
- The screening test for diabetic retinopathy is free.
- The test is painless.
- The test only takes 15–30 minutes.
- If the condition is detected in the early stages, sight loss can be prevented.

Smoking is particularly damaging to eye heath. For advice and support or to find your local stop smoking service, visit **www.stopsmokingni.info**



Data protection

Your screening records, including the outcomes of any treatment for retinopathy, are held by the screening programme.

Where did you obtain my personal details?

Details about you, and information relating to your diabetes, are collected from your GP by the screening programme and updated regularly. This includes your name, date of birth, address, important details about your diabetes, and information on the medication (if any) you are taking to control it.

Your information will not be passed outside the health service.

If you do not wish to have your information passed to the screening programme, you should discuss this with your GP.

What other information about me is held by the screening programme?

The screening programme also holds the photographs from your tests, information on the results of your tests and records of actions taken. If you go on to receive treatment for diabetic retinopathy, the screening programme will record this and any relevant outcomes.

How is my screening information used?

The screening programme will keep your photographs and details for at least eight years. The information is all held in a central electronic database. This allows the programme to compare your most recent photographs with previous ones.

Screening records are also reviewed regularly to monitor and improve the quality of the programme, and to maintain the expertise of the specialist staff. This is an important part of all screening programmes. Only staff working for the Northern Ireland Diabetic Eye Screening Programme may see and review your records. The programme is run by Belfast Health and Social Care Trust and the Public Health Agency.

For further information on diabetic retinopathy, visit **www.publichealth.hscni.net/desp** or speak to your GP, diabetic nurse or optometrist.

Alternatively you can contact the screening office at:

Diabetic Eye Screening Programme
Belfast Health and Social Care Trust
Tel: 028 9615 7600.

HSC Public Health Agency

Public Health Agency
12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.
Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).
www.publichealth.hscni.net

Find us on:

This publication is adapted from information originally developed by the UK Health Security Agency and is used under the Open Government Licence v 3.0

11/26