



**For Immediate Release**

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**Ophthalmologists Provide Free Eye Exams in the U.S. and Puerto Rico to Help Prevent Blindness Caused by Diabetes**

*Eye Care America Volunteers Work to Raise Awareness and Provide Care through Month-long Campaign*

**SAN FRANCISCO – November 2, 2011** - An estimated 26 million Americans have [diabetes](#), with the number expected to significantly grow in the future. If current trends continue, 15 percent of American adults – or more than 37 million Americans – will be living with diabetes by the end of 2015. One serious consequence of this disease that affects many people is vision loss or blindness due to a condition called [diabetic retinopathy](#). According to the 2011 National Diabetes Fact Sheet, diabetes is the leading cause of new cases of blindness among adults between the ages of 20–74. In 2005-2008, 4.2 million people with diabetes 40 or older were diagnosed with diabetic retinopathy, and of these, nearly 700,000 had advanced diabetic retinopathy that could lead to severe vision loss.

Each year during the month of November, the American Academy of Ophthalmology recognizes Diabetic Eye Disease Awareness Month in order to bring awareness to the public about the vision problems that can occur for patients who have not been diagnosed or are not actively controlling their diabetes. In fact, a simple [eye exam](#) can help prevent unnecessary vision loss caused by diabetes. Through [EyeCare America](#), a public service program of the Foundation of the American Academy of Ophthalmology, thousands of volunteer ophthalmologists throughout the U.S. and Puerto Rico are providing eye exams at no out-of-pocket cost to people age 65 and older.

[Diabetic retinopathy](#) is caused by changes in the blood vessels of the retina. In some people with diabetic retinopathy, blood vessels may swell and leak fluid. In others, abnormal new blood vessels grow on the surface of the retina.

The only way to diagnose and treat diabetic retinopathy is through an eye exam with an [ophthalmologist](#), an eye medical doctor. In its early stages, diabetic retinopathy usually has no warning signs. Over time, however, the vision blurs and everyday tasks become more difficult, and once lost,

vision does not usually return. Left untreated the disease can lead to blindness. In fact, the World Health Organization estimates that after 15 years of diabetes, approximately 2 percent of people become blind, and about 10 percent develop severe visual impairment.

The American Academy of Ophthalmology recommends that everyone who has been diagnosed with diabetes make an appointment with an ophthalmologist. The earlier diabetic eye disease is diagnosed, the better the chances of avoiding vision loss.

“Diabetes is a devastating disease that can not only rob individuals of an active life, but can also steal their eyesight if left either undetected or untreated,” said Richard P. Mills, MD, ophthalmologist and chairman of EyeCare America. “By connecting people with EyeCare America’s free eye exams, volunteer ophthalmologists are helping to put an end to the unnecessary vision loss that so often accompanies this disease.”

Free examinations through EyeCare America are available for people who:

- Are U.S. citizens or legal residents,
- Are age 65 and older,
- Have not seen an ophthalmologist in three or more years, and
- Do not belong to an HMO or receive eye care benefits through the Veterans Administration.

For more information on the program including how to receive an eye exam, please visit:

[www.eyecareamerica.org](http://www.eyecareamerica.org).

### **About the American Academy of Ophthalmology**

The American Academy of Ophthalmology is the world’s largest association of eye physicians and surgeons — Eye M.D.s — with more than 30,000 members worldwide. Eye health care is provided by the three “O’s” – ophthalmologists, optometrists, and opticians. It is the ophthalmologist, or Eye M.D., who can treat it all: eye diseases, infections and injuries, and perform eye surgery. For more information, visit [www.aaio.org](http://www.aaio.org). The Academy’s EyeSmart® public education program works to educate the public about the importance of eye health and to empower them to preserve their healthy vision, by providing the most trusted and medically accurate information about eye diseases, conditions and injuries. Visit [www.geteyesmart.org](http://www.geteyesmart.org) to learn more.

### **About EyeCare America**

Established in 1985, EyeCare America, a public service program of the Foundation of the American Academy of Ophthalmology, is committed to the preservation of sight, accomplishing its mission through public service and education. EyeCare America provides year-round eye care services to medically underserved seniors and those at increased risk for eye disease through its corps of nearly 7,000 volunteer ophthalmologists dedicated to serving their communities. More than 90 percent of the care made available is provided at no out-of-pocket cost to the patients. Since its inception, EyeCare America has helped more than 1.5 million people. EyeCare America is a non-profit program whose success is made possible through charitable contributions from individuals, corporations and through the support of organizations such as Genentech and the Knights Templar Eye Foundation, Inc. More information can be found at: [www.eyecareamerica.org](http://www.eyecareamerica.org)

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