

Uphill battle against blindness

THE kidneys are usually the organs of focus when one is diagnosed with diabetes.

However, the eyes can also be affected in the form of diabetic retinopathy, which is the leading cause of blindness among diabetics globally. It is also one of the top causes of blindness in general - behind age-related eye problems such as glaucoma and cataract.

Diabetic retinopathy is a complication in which blood vessels in the retina are damaged and start to leak.

According to Datin Dr Teoh Su Lin, consultant ophthalmologist at Subang Jaya Medical Centre, diabetic retinopathy can be divided into two types - non-proliferative diabetic retinopathy (NPDR) and proliferative diabetic retinopathy (PDR).

NPDR is an earlier stage of diabetic retinopathy where blood vessels in the retina could leak cholesterol, fluid or blood.

Fluid leakage causes macular oedema (swelling of the macula) while cholesterol causes diabetic maculopathy. Leakage of blood causes ischaemia in the eye, which leads to the second and more advanced stage of diabetic retinopathy - PDR.

"As the condition gets worse, parts of the retina will become non-perfused and not get enough blood. Ischaemia, or a stroke, will

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Datin Dr Teoh Su Lin

most patients are not aware of their condition until it is too late. Therefore, she stresses the importance of educating patients to get their eyes checked regularly once they have been diagnosed with diabetes.

According to her, the crucial time for treatment is within the first five years of being diagnosed. Patients should also adopt healthy changes in their diet, exercise and, most importantly, take their medication to regulate blood sugar.

"Anyone who has had diabetes for more than 20 years will have an 80% chance of getting diabetic retinopathy," says Dr Teoh.

"The risk of getting it increases the longer you have diabetes. There is no cure for it and it will eventually set in - it is only a matter of time. However, if you do not control your diabetes, diabetic retinopathy may set in within five years.

"Once diabetes affects the eye, it becomes an uphill battle whereby 30% to 40% of patients may lose their vision. As

treatment only delays its progression.

Treatment options include using steroids and laser photocoagulation to stop the growth of abnormal blood vessels (they can even regress with laser), intentionally scarring the retina to prevent the formation of abnormal vessels, and injecting anti-vascular endothelial growth factor into the vitreous to regress the blood vessels and reduce macular oedema.

Intravitreal steroids have also been shown to be effective in macular oedema.

Dr Teoh says there are no symptoms to diabetic retinopathy other than a blurring of vision in the early stages or sudden loss of vision if the patient has reached the PDR stage. This is dangerous as



occur and result in PDR," explains Dr Teoh.

PDR occurs when abnormal blood vessels grow in the retina, which may burst suddenly and cause vitreous haemorrhage. This can lead to a total loss of vision in the patient.

Besides that, bleeding vessels can stimulate the eye to form scar tissue, causing tractional retinal detachment or a detached retina. This can also lead to blurring of vision depending on the severity and location of the detachment.

Lack of cure

Diabetic retinopathy is a serious condition as there is no cure and

diabetic retinopathy is the most common cause of blindness in diabetes patients, it is something they cannot ignore.

"Although the initial stages do not cause pain and only mild blurring, they need to get their eyes checked on a regular basis because that's the only way to detect a disease early and nip it in the bud."

■ For more information, call 03-5639 1212.

