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DIABETES CASES SKYROCKET ACROSS THE COUNTRY, LEADING TO RECORD INCREASES IN VISION LOSS

CHICAGO (Oct. 23, 2006) – Nearly 21 million Americans, both adults and children, have diabetes. In 2005, 1.5 million Americans aged 20 and older were diagnosed with the disease. And, the American Diabetes Association estimates that diabetes costs in 2002 totaled \$132 billion, including medical care, disability and lost work costs. That translates to about one out of every \$10 spent on healthcare.

Alarming, there are 54 million who have pre-diabetes, meaning their blood glucose levels are higher than normal. Without effective treatment, those cases can eventually develop into diabetes. Besides high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke, diabetes can also cause blindness. Diabetics are 60 percent more likely to develop cataracts and 40 percent more likely to develop glaucoma than those without diabetes. Diabetic retinopathy is the leading cause of new cases of blindness in adults.

“New treatments and medications are constantly being developed to try and battle the disease, but unfortunately, there is still no cure,” said Daniel D. Garrett, senior vice president of Prevent Blindness America. “Saving sight must be made a national priority. Without dedication of resources and access to effective new treatments and therapies, diabetic eye disease will continue to take a devastating economic and social toll.”

Diabetic retinopathy weakens the small blood vessels in the retina. Retinal blood vessels can break down, leak, or become blocked, impairing vision over time. Without treatment, it can result in permanent vision loss and in some cases, blindness. Once vision is lost it can never be restored.

There are two stages of diabetic retinopathy. The first stage, nonproliferative retinopathy, occurs when the blood vessels in the retina are damaged and begin to leak into the eye. Once these blood vessels become weak, they could collapse. Almost all Type 1 diabetes patients will develop this form of diabetic retinopathy.

Without treatment, nonproliferative retinopathy can develop into the second stage, proliferative retinopathy. To compensate for the damaged blood vessels, new blood vessels begin to grow in the retina. Unfortunately, the new vessels are weak and leak blood, which can block vision, or cause scar tissue to grow which can eventually lead to a detached retina.

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Prevent Blindness America Urges Eye Exams for Those Diagnosed or At-risk for Diabetes

Page 2

“Diabetic retinopathy is a very frightening disease because many people may have it and not even know it,” added Garrett. “The only way you can tell for certain is to visit your eye doctor and get a complete exam.”

Prevent Blindness America also recommends that everyone take the following steps to protect their eyesight:

- See an eye doctor at least once a year if you have diabetes or if you are at high risk.
- Maintain a healthy weight – if you are overweight, even a modest weight loss can help prevent Type 2 diabetes.
- Increase your physical activity – exercising 30 minutes a day, five times a week can cut your risk of Type 2 diabetes by more than half. It is important to check with your doctor before starting an exercise program.
- Watch and control your blood sugar levels and blood pressure.
- All women who are pregnant or who are planning to become pregnant and have been diagnosed with diabetes should get a full, dilated eye exam.
- Quit smoking as that lifestyle change can help reduce your risk of developing diabetic retinopathy, age-related macular degeneration, glaucoma and cataracts.

For more information on diabetic eye disease, please visit Prevent Blindness America's dedicated Web site at www.diabetes-sight.org or call 1-800-331-2020. Printed materials are available in both English and Spanish.

About Prevent Blindness America

Founded in 1908, Prevent Blindness America is the nation's leading volunteer eye health and safety organization dedicated to fighting blindness and saving sight. Focused on promoting a continuum of vision care, Prevent Blindness America touches the lives of millions of people each year through public and professional education, advocacy, certified vision screening and training, community and patient service programs and research. These services are made possible through the generous support of the American public. Together with a network of affiliates, divisions and chapters, it's committed to eliminating preventable blindness in America. For more information, or to make a contribution to the sight-saving fund, call 1-800-331-2020 or visit us on the Web at www.preventblindness.org.

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