

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MAJORITY OF AMERICANS LACK AWARENESS OF DIABETIC EYE DISEASE

The American Optometric Association and the Colorado Optometric Association remind consumers about the importance of yearly eye exams during National Diabetes Awareness Month

DENVER, CO, November 1, 2011 – The American Optometric Association (AOA) and the Colorado Optometric Association (COA) are using National Diabetes Awareness Month to urge Americans living with diabetes to schedule yearly comprehensive eye exams to help detect diabetic eye disease.

Since diabetes is the leading cause of new cases of blindness in adults 20-74 years of age, early detection is critical. Each year, 12,000 – 24,000 people lose their sight because diabetic eye disease rarely has early warning signs. Detection begins with having a dilated eye examination every year to check for signs of diabetic eye disease and following a course of action recommended by an optometrist.

Results from the AOA's 2011 American Eye-Q® consumer survey revealed that 55 percent of people are unaware that diabetic eye disease often has no visual signs or symptoms. Additionally, 44 percent of Americans don't know that a person with diabetes should have a comprehensive eye exam once a year.

"When optometrists dilate a patient's eyes during an eye exam, they have a clear view of the retina and can look for indications of diabetic eye disease, such as leaking blood vessels, swelling and deposits within the retina," said Dr. Karen Wharton, President of COA. "Optometrists often serve as the first line of detection for diabetes, since the eye is the only place in the body that blood vessels can be seen in their natural condition without having to surgically cut through skin."

Without yearly comprehensive eye exams, conditions such as diabetic retinopathy can go unnoticed by patients until the disease has further progressed towards blindness. Diabetic retinopathy causes progressive damage to the retina, the light sensitive lining at the back of the eye. It is a serious, sight-threatening complication of diabetes that results from damage to tiny blood vessels that nourish the retina. These small blood vessels leak blood and other fluids that cause swelling of retinal tissue may lead to permanent visual impairment or blindness without prompt treatment. Diabetic retinopathy is also linked to increased risk of kidney, heart and nerve disease, making its earlier detection even more important.

"A patient with diabetes help prevent or slow the development of diabetic retinopathy by taking prescribed medication as directed, sticking to a healthy diet, exercising regularly, controlling high blood pressure and abnormal blood cholesterol levels, and avoiding alcohol and smoking," said Dr. Wharton. "Once the disease develops, the potential for significant vision loss can be dramatically reduced by more aggressive blood sugar, pressure and cholesterol control and timely referral for laser treatment, when appropriate. In addition, newer medications for retinopathy have recently been shown to

be very effective for preserving, and sometimes improving vision. The key is to detect the problem early so that the chances of maintaining good eyesight are maximized.”

Several factors influence whether someone with diabetes develops diabetic retinopathy. These include poor blood sugar, blood pressure, and blood lipid control, the length of time with diabetes, race and family history. However, the majority of people diagnosed with diabetes will have some degree of retinopathy within twenty years of diagnosis.

Both African Americans and Hispanics are nearly twice as likely to have diabetes as Caucasians. According to the American Diabetes Association, on average, about 11.8 percent of Hispanics and 12.6 percent of African Americans aged 20 years or older have been diagnosed with diabetes.

“By the year 2020, the number of people suffering from diabetic eye disease is expected to nearly double,” said Dr. Wharton. “To that end, the fact that eye diseases like diabetic retinopathy often progress silently, without symptoms, must become common knowledge.”

To find an optometrist in your area, or for additional information on eye health, and diabetic retinopathy, please visit www.aoa.org.

About the American Eye-Q® survey:

The sixth annual American Eye-Q® survey was created and commissioned in conjunction with Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates (PSB). From May 19 – 23, 2011, using an online methodology, PSB interviewed 1,000 Americans 18 years and older who embodied a nationally representative sample of U.S. general population. (Margin of error at 95 percent confidence level)

About the American Optometric Association (AOA):

The American Optometric Association represents approximately 36,000 doctors of optometry, optometry students and paraoptometric assistants and technicians. Optometrists serve patients in nearly 6,500 communities across the country, and in 3,500 of those communities are the only eye doctors. Doctors of optometry provide two-thirds of all primary eye care in the United States.

American Optometric Association doctors of optometry are highly qualified, trained doctors on the frontline of eye and vision care who examine, diagnose, treat and manage diseases and disorders of the eye. In addition to providing eye and vision care, optometrists play a major role in a patient’s overall health and well-being by detecting systemic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension.

Prior to optometry school, optometrists typically complete four years of undergraduate study, culminating in a bachelor’s degree. Required undergraduate coursework for pre-optometry students is extensive and covers a wide variety of advanced health, science and mathematics. Optometry school consists of four years of post-graduate, doctoral study concentrating on both the eye and systemic health. In addition to their formal training, doctors of optometry must undergo annual continuing education to stay current on the latest standards of care. For more information, visit www.aoa.org.

###