

**Communication Plan Excerpt:
A Diabetic Eye Disease Program
For People with Diabetes**

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I. Introduction

Diabetes affects approximately 14 million Americans, and about 40 percent of all people with diabetes have at least mild signs of diabetic retinopathy, the most common ocular complication of diabetes. Other ocular complications include cataract, glaucoma, and retinal vascular disease. Diabetic retinopathy is the leading cause of blindness in adults 25 to 74 years of age. People with diabetes are significantly more at risk of blindness than the general population.

Therefore, one priority of the National Eye Health Education Program (NEHEP) is to increase awareness and knowledge of diabetic eye disease and to encourage actions to prevent loss of vision. The NEHEP is being coordinated by the National Eye Institute (NEI), one of the National Institutes of Health, in partnership with other public and private organizations concerned with eye health.

This document outlines the communication plan for the diabetic eye disease education program, formulated as a result of recommendations presented at a NEHEP Planning Conference in March 1989, planning documents produced by the NEHEP staff since that time, and deliberations of the NEHEP Planning Committee. The plan describes an education program for people with diabetes.

In developing the plan further, the NEHEP staff will identify current education efforts and the most critical gaps in public knowledge, attitudes, and practices. The staff will also actively seek opportunities to work in partnership with other interested organizations. Therefore, the tasks outlined here for the diabetic eye disease communication program will be prioritized according to need, opportunities for collaboration, and potential impact in order to use the NEHEP's resources most effectively.

The first section of this communication plan for educating people with diabetes about diabetic eye disease presents the need for the Program, Program objectives, target

audiences and target audience research. The subsequent section covers messages, channels, and materials.

II. Background

National Eye Institute

Eye disease, visual impairment and disability, and blindness are major public health problems. In the United States alone, more than 11 million people have some degree of visual impairment. Of this visually impaired population, approximately 890,000 people are legally blind. In addition to the physical and emotional stresses associated with eye disease and blindness, there are significant economic burdens. Eye disorders and blindness are estimated to cost the nation more than \$16 billion annually.

Convinced that visual disorders constituted a national problem that could only be solved by greater emphases on vision research. Congress authorized the establishment of the National Eye Institute (NEI) in 1968 as part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Institute's mission is to find new ways to prevent, diagnose, and treat diseases of the eye and visual system, thus preventing, reducing, and possibly even eliminating blindness.

National Eye Health Education Program

Since its inception, the NEI has conducted a public information program, responding to inquiries and disseminating authoritative information on eye disease and the progress of vision research. Educational materials for the public have described the causes, if known, of common eye diseases; their signs and symptoms; methods of prevention and treatment; referrals to sources of help; and current, relevant research. Blindness prevention education has become more feasible during the last decade when the results of several clinical trials provided dramatic evidence that laser treatment could reduce the risk of vision loss from diabetic retinopathy and macular edema.

Although the NEI has long been committed to communicating research results to appropriate audiences, a sustained, large-scale health education program has until recently been precluded by a lack of funding and manpower. However, beginning in fiscal year 1988, the Congress appropriated funds that have enabled the NEI to increase its commitment to the prevention of blindness through public and professional education programs and the

encouragement of regular eye examinations. This was the first distinct NEI Congressional appropriation designated for eye health promotion and education.

In response, the NEI has established the National Eye Health Education Program (NEHEP) to implement large-scale information, education, and applied research programs. The initial emphases of the NEHEP is on public, patient, and professional education concerning the importance of early detection and treatment of diabetic eye disease and glaucoma. These blinding eye diseases have been selected as the Program's initial focus for three reasons:

- The high prevalence of these diseases,
- The scientific evidence demonstrating that blindness caused by these diseases can frequently be prevented by early detection and treatment, and
- The existence of important health messages that need to be conveyed to a variety of target audiences.

In the future, other topics, such as coping with low vision, may be addressed.

The goals of the NEHEP are to:

- Increase awareness of glaucoma and diabetic eye disease in selected high-risk target audiences in the United States.
- Increase awareness of the importance of early detection of glaucoma and diabetic eye disease in preventing visual loss, with the ultimate goal of appropriate behavior change.
- Increase health care providers' awareness of the need for regular comprehensive eye examinations with dilated pupils for those at risk for glaucoma and diabetic eye disease, with the ultimate goal of appropriate behavior change.

Additional background information on the NEHEP, including its operating principles, is contained in *From Vision Research to Eye Health Education: Planning the Partnership*.

The NEHEP Partnership consists of organizations interested in eye health education and capable of furthering the achievement of the goals and objectives of the NEHEP. This group includes professional, voluntary, and civic organizations; federal, state and local agencies; and

private industry. Invitations to join the NEHEP Partnership were extended to the 35 organizations represented at the 1989 Planning Conference.

III. Overview of Communication Plan—A Diabetic Eye Disease Education Program for People with Diabetes

This section of the communication plan for educating people with diabetes about diabetic eye disease presents the need for the Program and describes Program objectives, target audiences, and target audience research.

The Program Need

As already stated, there are 14 million people with diabetes in the United States, with about half of these undiagnosed. Each year, 700,000 new cases of diabetes are diagnosed. Overall, people with diabetes are estimated to be 25 times more likely to progress to blindness than people without diabetes of similar age and sex. People with diabetes are at increased risk for glaucoma, cataract, macular edema, and diabetic retinopathy. Review of existing data regarding knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to diabetic eye disease reveals that:

- Two recent studies showed that 32 to 50 percent of the people with diabetes had minimal or no ophthalmologic eye examinations and subsequently were defined as being at high risk for unrecognized diabetic eye disease. Because diabetic retinopathy, one of the ocular complications, is asymptomatic in the early, most treatable stages, the individual affected does not take action as soon as desirable.
- A regional study of people with diabetes who had not had an eye examination in the last year found that virtually all respondents believed that diabetes had made them vulnerable to losing their eyesight. However, respondents said that they had not had their eyes checked because of cost or lack of symptoms/eye problems.
- Most people in a focus group setting seemed to view the health of their eyes in the abstract rather than the concrete. Asymptomatic problems did not seem real, even though respondents stated how important their eyes were to them.

Clearly, more people with diabetes need to seek regular, comprehensive eye examinations to safeguard their vision. This Program initiative will seek to increase awareness and knowledge and to motivate people with diabetes to seek eye care.

Although the primary focus will be on diabetic retinopathy, information on the other eye complications of diabetes, such as glaucoma, cataract, and retinal vascular disease, will be included.