

UAMS News Bureau

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New UAMS Screening Initiative Aims to Save Vision of Patients with Diabetes

LITTLE ROCK – Patients with diabetes visiting University of Arkansas of Medical Science (UAMS) Family Medicine Clinics throughout the state will soon receive a new screening during regular doctor’s visits in an effort to save their vision.

The screening is called teleretinal imaging and uses a special camera to take pictures of the retina at the back of each eye. Images from the camera will be electronically sent to and reviewed by eye doctors at the UAMS Harvey & Bernice Jones Eye Institute trained to spot retina damage, a frequent complication of diabetes.

If doctors find damage, patients will be notified and referred to an eye specialist in their area for further treatment.

“It might help to think of these retinal screenings for patients with diabetes as the fifth vital sign,” said Mark T. Jansen, M.D., chief medical officer of UAMS Regional Campuses where the Family Medical Centers are located. “With any patient we record their weight, height, blood pressure and temperature before a doctor’s visit. When a patient with diabetes comes to us, now we will also get an image of their retinas as well.”

The reason for this new initiative, said Sami Uwaydat, M.D., interim chair of the UAMS College of Medicine Department of Ophthalmology, is that only about half of the 350,000 Arkansans with diabetes ever make an appointment with an eye doctor, often because they may live many years with diabetes and don’t notice any change to their vision.

This “silent damage,” present in one in five diabetes patients, is caused by protein buildup at the back of the eye, weakening blood vessels and potentially causing bleeding. By the time a patient notices the damage, vision loss is often irreversible.

“We want to achieve a perfect screening rate for next year,” Uwaydat said. “We aim for a 100% screening rate in 2020.”

The screenings are performed in clinics in Jonesboro and should begin in the other UAMS regional campus clinics this year, Jansen and Uwaydat said. The other clinics are in Fayetteville/Springdale, Magnolia, Texarkana, Batesville, Helena-West Helena and Pine Bluff. Two years ago Pine Bluff was the site of a pilot program by UAMS and Blue Cross Blue Shield that proved the screening process was successful. Based upon this pilot, the insurance provider agreed to approve new billing codes to facilitate the procedure across the state.

Jansen said the current project will combine a \$20,000 grant from the UAMS Chancellor's Circle fund with a \$90,000 gift from the Lion's Clubs of Arkansas to purchase new, user-friendly specialty cameras for the regional clinics.

"With these new automated cameras, there's a better chance of getting a picture that our eye specialists will say is of adequate quality to make a determination," said Jansen.

The screening is easy for patients, and eye specialists will know immediately whether or not there is damage from diabetes. The accuracy rate for teleretinal imaging is about 90%.

Additionally, screening images will spot a variety of other conditions such as glaucoma, retinal detachment, tumors, etc. Early detection of these conditions can help save a patient's vision.

"Our primary objective is to screen for diabetic retinopathy, or damage to the retina. However, when one of our physicians opens up the image to see if there's any damage, they can also spot a number of other threats to vision," said Uwaydat.

UAMS is the state's only health sciences university, with colleges of Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Health Professions and Public Health; a graduate school; hospital; a main campus in Little Rock; a Northwest Arkansas regional campus in Fayetteville; a statewide network of regional campuses; and seven institutes: the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute, Jackson T. Stephens Spine & Neurosciences Institute, Harvey & Bernice Jones Eye Institute, Psychiatric Research Institute, Donald W. Reynolds Institute on Aging, Translational Research Institute and Institute for Digital Health & Innovation. It is the only adult Level 1 trauma center in the state. UAMS has 2,727 students, 870 medical residents and five dental residents. It is the state's largest public employer with more than 10,000 employees, including 1,200 physicians who provide care to patients at UAMS, its regional campuses, Arkansas Children's Hospital, the VA Medical Center and Baptist Health. Visit www.uams.edu or www.uamshealth.com. Find us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#) or [Instagram](#).

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