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Focus is on the fight to reduce blindness from diabetes

South Tyneside NHS Foundation Trust is spearheading a campaign to raise awareness of the importance of people with diabetes attending for regular eye screening.

Coinciding with World Diabetes Day on November 14th and NHS Self Care Week, which takes place from November 14th-20th, the initiative aims to target those people who have failed to attend screening clinic appointments, or who have not responded to repeated invitations to take part in the quick, easy and potentially sight-saving screening test.

New data from Public Health England reveals that 3.8 million people in England aged over 16 had diabetes in 2015, around 9% of the adult population. The disease is placing ever increasing pressures on the NHS nationally, with one person being diagnosed with the condition every two minutes.

The eye disease diabetic retinopathy is a complication of diabetes and is one of the leading causes of blindness in the working population in the developed world. If left untreated, it can lead to sight loss, which can have a devastating impact on individuals and their families. By promptly identifying and treating the disease, however, the effects can be reduced or avoided completely.

The diabetic screening team at South Tyneside NHS Foundation Trust is responsible for screening about 24,000 people at various community health locations across South Tyneside and Sunderland.

Diabetic screening service manager Helen Bone said: "We have a duty of care to people with diabetes in South Tyneside and Sunderland to provide screening with the aim of reducing the risk of damage to eyesight from diabetic eye disease and, ultimately, reducing the incidence of blindness through diabetes. A worrying problem, locally and nationally, is the number of people who fail to attend clinic appointments. Unused appointment slots are a costly burden on precious NHS resources, however, more importantly, missing out on diabetic eye screening increases the risk of sight loss.

"People who fail to attend are often more likely to need eye hospital intervention further down the line. Non-attendance for screening reduces the chances of detecting disease early, which is extremely important as doctors can look at various options, working with the patient to improve blood sugar management and target other risk factors. If treatment is needed, early intervention is crucial in order to help reduce the chances of eye disease causing sight loss. Left unchecked, diabetic retinopathy can reach an advanced stage without the person being aware of symptoms."

She added: "I would urge anyone who has diabetes and has missed an appointment with us, or has not responded to an invitation to attend screening, to consider the importance of taking part."

The screening test involves taking high quality digital photographs of the retina, the sensory surface at the back of the eye, in order to detect any changes or damage to blood vessels. People with diabetes in South Tyneside and Sunderland also receive a full check of their feet as part of the screening visit. This is another good reason to attend for screening, as diabetes can reduce the blood supply to your feet and cause a loss of feeling known as peripheral neuropathy. This can mean foot injuries do not heal well and you may not notice if your foot is sore or injured.

Patients are referred into the screening programme via their GP but anyone wanting to find out more about the service can phone 0191 4192430 or email diabeticscreening@stft.nhs.uk
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Pictured above: Russell Martin, Deputy Lead for the South Tyneside and Sunderland Diabetic Screening Service

Issued on behalf of South Tyneside NHS Foundation Trust by Kay Jordan

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