

## Diabetic Retinopathy: ARE YOU AT RISK?

*Written by Kimberly Markham, Quality Improvement Nurse, Medical Associates Health Plans - Dubuque, IA*

Diabetes is a condition that impacts blood vessels all over the body, with a specific focus on vessels in the kidneys and eyes. When diabetes affects the blood vessels in the eyes, it is known as diabetic retinopathy.

The retina, located at the back of the eye, plays a crucial role in detecting and transmitting visual images to the brain. The front portion of the retina is filled with significant blood vessels. In cases of diabetes, these blood vessels can suffer damage, leading to the leakage of fluid or blood and the formation of scar tissue. This leakage impairs the retina's ability to detect and transmit images effectively.

During the early stages of diabetic retinopathy, vision is typically not affected. However, as the condition advances, new blood vessels develop in the retina as the body responds to damaged vessels caused by diabetes. These new vessels, although abnormal, attempt to replace the damaged ones. Unfortunately, they can bleed, causing blurred vision and in some cases, complete vision loss.

Abnormal blood vessel growth on the iris may lead to glaucoma and diabetic retinopathy can also contribute to the formation of cataracts in the eyes. Furthermore, these new vessels may lead to retinal damage, forming scar tissue and pulling the retina out of its proper position. This condition, known as retinal detachment, can result in blindness if not treated promptly.

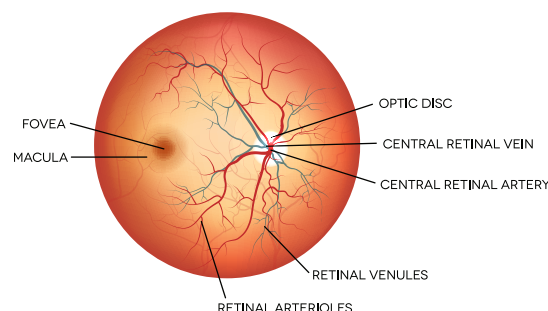
### SYMPTOMS

- There are usually no symptoms in the early stages
- Floaters or double vision
- Difficulty reading or doing work that requires close focus

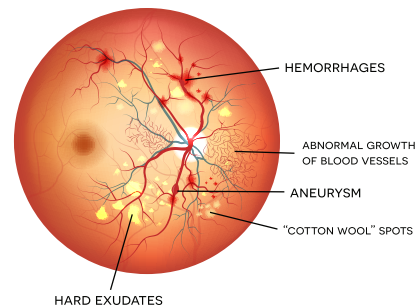
### CAUSES

- High blood sugar levels and blood pressure
- Uncontrolled blood sugar levels
- High cholesterol levels
- The longer someone has diabetes, the greater their risk of developing complications. Typically this condition doesn't manifest until an individual has been diabetic for a minimum of 10 years.

### NORMAL RETINA



### DIABETIC RETINOPATHY



### REDUCING YOUR RISK

- Keeping your blood sugar under control
- Monitoring your blood pressure
- Maintaining a healthy diet
- Exercising regularly
- Getting an eye exam at least once a year

**Studies have shown that detecting eye complications related to diabetes early, can result in prompt treatment, leading to improved outcomes.**

If you have an eye care provider, please schedule your annual dilated eye exam today and ask them to fax the results to the **Medical Associates Patient Services Department at 563-584-3117**. If you have questions on your coverage for preventive dilated exams, especially for diabetes, by contacting **Medical Associates Member Services Department at 563-584-4885** before scheduling. Don't delay your screening, as early detection is vital for diabetic eye issues. For questions, reach out to your primary care provider or your diabetic care manager. Your well-being is our priority!

# Snowflakes and Stethoscopes

## A Story Guide to Discussing Social Determinants of Health with Your Doctor



Written by Rick Walters, Manager of Quality Improvement, Medical Associates Health Plans - Dubuque, IA

### **Prologue: 7 Short Story Acts to Prepare for the Season**

Winter has arrived with its snowy charm, but it's also a time when our health can face unique challenges. What if we told you that discussing social determinants of health with your doctor during the winter could be fun and insightful? In this article, we'll guide you through the chilly season, offering tips on how to engage in constructive and enjoyable conversations with your healthcare provider.

### **Act 1: The Winter Health Check-Up**

Start the winter season by scheduling a check-up with your doctor, especially if you haven't yet scheduled your annual wellness visit. Discuss your overall health and any specific concerns you have related to the cold weather. Remember, a good conversation is the first step to staying healthy and enjoying winter to the fullest.

### **Act 2: Your House and Home**

Living conditions, especially during winter, can greatly affect your health. Discuss your heating and insulation, and any concerns about drafts or mold. Ask if there may be any helpful resources and/or tips to help keep your home warm and safe during the chilly months. Don't be afraid to share your quirky winter rituals!

### **Act 3: Winter Nutrition and Comfort Foods**

Winter is the season of hearty meals, but it can also lead to dietary challenges. Talk to your doctor about maintaining a balanced diet in the winter, and ask for their favorite cozy, healthy recipes. Share your own go-to comfort foods and culinary adventures.

### **Act 4: Beating the Winter Blues**

The winter season can sometimes bring about feelings of sadness related to a number of reasons—including reduced sunlight. Open up to your doctor about your mental health, discuss any changes in mood, and ask about strategies to boost your spirits during winter. Share your fun holiday traditions, which may include whiskers on kittens and warm woolen mittens, that keep your spirits high.

### **Act 5: Winter Safety and Activities**

Navigating icy sidewalks or partaking in winter activities can impact your physical well-being. Ask your doctor about staying safely active during winter and if there are any precautions to take. Share your winter sports and outdoor activity plans—they might have some exciting recommendations!

### **Act 6: Financial and Holiday Stress**

Winter is often associated with financial and holiday stress. Discuss your concerns with your doctor, whether it's budgeting or managing the pressure of gift-giving. Share your creative, cost-effective ways to enjoy the holiday season without breaking the bank.

### **Act 7: Staying Connected and Digital Health Resources**

Consider discussing how technology and digital resources can assist with healthcare during the winter. Explore telehealth options and ask about the best ways to access healthcare information online. Share your favorite health apps and resources, making it a two-way learning experience.

### **Epilogue: Embracing Winter's Health Journey Together**

By approaching your healthcare provider with a positive and engaging attitude, discussing social determinants of health during winter can be a fun and enlightening experience. Remember, your doctor is there to help you enjoy the season to its fullest, despite the cold weather and unique challenges it brings.

So, put on your coziest sweater, sip on some hot cocoa, and have a warm and enjoyable conversation with your doctor this winter. Together, you can ensure a season full of health, happiness, and unforgettable moments.

To help eliminate possible health disparities and inequities you may encounter, we created a **2-minute questionnaire for you to answer**. This will give us a better understanding of your well-being in order to better care for you.



Please scan this code or visit the link below to fill yours out <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/MAHP-SDOH-survey>. An Español version is available.

STEPS TO A HEART  
HEALTHY NEW YEAR:

# How to Break Bad Habits & Behaviors



Old habits can be hard to break, and new habits hard to make, but with these six basic steps you can develop new, healthy behaviors that stick.

## Can You Retrain Your Brain?

Make a list and check it twice. This time you are going to kill it:

- Make a healthy snack
- Go to the gym
- Don't waste time on cell phone
- Read a classic novel
- House train pet

**FEBRUARY**  
AMERICAN HEART MONTH

We all know habits don't change overnight—not for simple doggies and not for big-brained human beings. But there's good news: research shows that just like a pet can learn that they should go potty outside instead of on your gym bag, you can rewire your brain to change your own habits. But we humans need a subtler approach than just a few treats and “good boys” to change our ways.

Here's how you can better understand how habits form and how to replace bad ones with good.

## 6 Steps to Changing Habits

### 1. Identify Cues

Something has to trigger a habit, and a cue can be anything. Maybe stress makes you crave chocolate, or the sound of your alarm triggers you to hit the snooze button. Identifying cues helps you understand what puts your habits into motion.

### 2. Disrupt

Once you know the cues, you can throw bad habits off track. If the alarm cues you to hit the snooze button every morning, put the alarm clock on the other side of the room. Trekking across the cold floor will likely disrupt the snooze habit.

### 3. Replace

Research shows that replacing a bad behavior with a good one is more effective than stopping the bad behavior alone. The new behavior “interferes” with the old habit and prevents your brain from going into autopilot. Deciding to eat fruit every time your mind thinks “cookie” substitutes a positive behavior for a negative habit.

### 4. Keep It Simple

It's usually hard to change a habit because the behavior has become easy and automatic. The opposite is true, too: new behaviors can be hard because your brain's basal ganglia, (the “autopilot” part), hasn't taken over this behavior yet. Simplifying new behaviors helps you integrate them into your autopilot routines.

### 5. Think Long-Term

Habits often form because they satisfy short-term impulses, the way chewing on your nails might immediately calm your nerves. But short-term desires often have long-term consequences, like nasty, splintered, chewed up fingers. Focusing long-term while trying to change some habits will help you remember why you're investing the effort.

### 6. Persist

Research has shown that what you've done before is a strong indicator of what you'll do next. This means established habits are hard to break. But the good news is, if you keep at it, your new behaviors will turn into habits, too. Persistence works—at first it might be painful to get up at 5 AM for that jog, but soon it will be second nature.

**So, habits can be changed, and with a bit of time and some effort, healthy behaviors can become second nature. Now get on it, so you can be Healthy for Good!**

Source: [www.heart.org](http://www.heart.org)





PRESORTED  
STANDARD  
US POSTAGE PAID  
PERMIT NO. 477  
DUBUQUE, IA

## HEALTH AND WELLNESS

**Robust** | Published by Medical Associates Health Plans  
1605 Associates Drive | Dubuque, IA 52002  
1.563.556.8070 | 1.800.747.8900  
[www.mahealthplans.com](http://www.mahealthplans.com)

# Why Should You Have a Primary Care Provider?



Primary care providers (PCP), such as doctors, nurse practitioners, or physician assistants, serve as your main medical point of contact. They play a crucial role in promoting overall health, shifting the focus from seeking assistance only when sick or injured. Your PCP serves as a health coach, guiding you on ways to maintain good health and longevity. Key reasons to have a PCP include:

- 1. Better Preventive Care** - A PCP, familiar with your medical history and family background, can offer tailored recommendations for screenings, identify and address minor issues early, and maintain accurate vaccination records to keep you up to date on preventive measures.
- 2. Continuity of Care** - Having a competent PCP offers a continuity of care that long-term health maintenance requires. The provider can treat the “whole person,” taking into account your history and existing conditions. Timely diagnosis increases the chances that you will be able to lead a longer and more productive life.
- 3. A Key Resource** - A PCP should be the first person in the healthcare system that you contact when you have a question or a problem. The provider can answer any questions or recommend a specialist to meet your needs. The PCP can also help you find other resources, such as support groups and classes.

## FOR YOUR REFERENCE

Information related to MAHP's quality improvement plan, case management, disease management, member rights, communications, appeals process, after-hours assistance, accreditation/awards, and privacy/confidentiality may be viewed at: [www.mahealthplans.com](http://www.mahealthplans.com). Persons without access to the internet may request paper copies by contacting MAHP at 1-800-747-8900 or 563-556-8070. Please ask to speak with a member of the QI team for assistance.

*Medical Associates Health Plan complies with applicable Federal civil rights laws and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, or sex. [www.mahealthplans.com/hp/about-us/legal-and-privacy/non-discrimination-policy/](http://www.mahealthplans.com/hp/about-us/legal-and-privacy/non-discrimination-policy/). Medical Associates is a Cost Plan with a Medicare contract. Enrollment in Medical Associates Health Plans depends on contract renewal. Y0045\_MAHP 1808\_C*

**QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR HEALTH INSURANCE?** Call us at 563.584.4885 or email [memberservices@mahealthcare.com](mailto:memberservices@mahealthcare.com)