



Innovative Program Saves Diabetics' Eyesight

By Sam Kennedy

LEHIGH VALLEY - For people living with diabetes, the biggest threat to their eyesight often arrives with no symptoms. Diabetic retinopathy, the leading cause of blindness in adults with diabetes, is both silent and largely preventable. A simple, five-minute eye scan can identify concerns long before you notice changes in your vision.

Star Community Health, affiliated with St. Luke's University Health Network, is recognized as one of Pennsylvania's top performers in diabetes care. Every Star primary care office is equipped with technology that captures retinal images quickly and comfortably. The images are reviewed by a third-party specialist who sends results directly to the patient's primary care provider.

Last year alone, Star Community Health helped more than 200 people protect — or even save — their eyesight through these screenings. Beginning in mid-February, the Intelligent Retinal Imaging System (or IRIS) will be available at Star's new rural health primary care offices in Carbon and Schuylkill Counties.

"People who have diabetes are very aware they need to check their blood sugar and have foot exams regularly to prevent complications," said Karen Hepworth, Director of Quality Management at Star Community Health. "But they're not always aware that diabetes can affect their eyesight as well. Diabetic retinopathy has no symptoms until you've already lost some of your vision. If caught early, retinopathy is treatable. That's what makes this test so important. It's quick, painless, and can save someone's vision."

Star Community Health has delivered this sight-saving service across eastern Pennsylvania with outstanding success for six years. In 2025, Star centers performed IRIS eye screenings on 912 people. Nearly 300 of those patients were found to have some form of eye disease, including 178 with diabetic retinopathy. As a result of the IRIS scans, 207 people were referred for treatment to prevent further vision loss.

This means nearly 23 percent of screened patients were considered "saves" — a significant rise from 16 percent in 2022. Star Community Health's experience shows a clear trend: The more patients they screen, the more people they can help to preserve their sight.

The test itself is simple and pain-free. During a regular office visit, patients sit at a tabletop machine in a darkened room to allow their pupils to dilate naturally, then focus on a small dot as the device takes a series of images. The entire process takes just a few minutes.

"Without this screening, some people would have eventually lost their sight. The damage is not reversible," Hepworth noted.

IRIS screenings are offered at several Star Community Health locations, including Sigal Family Medicine in Allentown; Family Medicine in Bethlehem; Southside Internal Medicine in Bethlehem; and Coventry Family Medicine in Phillipsburg, New Jersey. Beginning in mid-February, screenings will also be available at Star Community rural health practices in Hometown, Ringtown, and Lansford.

Star Community Health, a Federally Qualified Health Center Look-Alike (FQHC), provides high-quality primary care, including Pediatrics, Women's Health, and Dental services, to more than 50,000 patients across the region. These FQHCs deliver accessible, cost-effective preventative care for insured, underinsured, and uninsured patients alike.

For people living with diabetes, getting this eye exam is one of the most effective steps they can take to protect their long-term vision. Star Community Health uses advanced technology to support comprehensive care for diabetes, hypertension, and other chronic conditions. In fact, Star practices consistently outperform most Community Health Centers and primary care offices in managing chronic disease.

To schedule a diabetic eye screening or to find a primary care provider for yourself or your family, visit Star Community Health online or call 484-822-7827.



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