

Macular Degeneration: 5 Healthier Habits for Healthier Eyes

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Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is a common cause of vision loss. As the name implies, it is associated with aging, and it affects a part of the eye called the macula. The macula is the central and most sensitive part of the retina—the part of the eye that converts light into neurological signals that can be rendered into images by the brain. The macula is made up of millions of nerve cells. When these nerve cells become damaged, the eyes and brain cannot render images as clearly as they could when the eye was healthy, and vision loss occurs.

The type of vision loss associated with AMD is called central vision loss—the center of vision becomes blurred and may have blank spots, while the peripheral or outer edges of the vision remain clear. There are two types of late-stage AMD, wet and dry. With wet AMD, abnormal blood vessels develop beneath the retina and leak blood and fluid into the eye. About 10 to 20 percent of people with AMD have this type. The majority have dry AMD, where there is no leakage, but substantial vision loss can occur. While AMD does not cause complete blindness, it can cause legal blindness.

People with AMD are encouraged to make healthy lifestyle choices, which may help prevent AMD or slow the progression of vision loss. Here is a look at some steps to you can take to protect your vision from AMD.

Quit smoking

If you are a smoker, quit (and if you're a nonsmoker, take care to avoid secondhand smoke). AMD is more common among smokers, and smokers develop AMD at younger ages than nonsmokers. People who smoke and have AMD are encouraged to quit. While quitting smoking can be very challenging, remember that there are resources to help you. Talk to your healthcare provider about nicotine replacement therapy and strategies for smoking cessation.

Exercise

AMD is less common in people who have a healthy lifestyle that includes one to two hours of low-intensity exercise per day. Exercise also protects against other diseases associated with AMD, including obesity, cardiovascular disease, high cholesterol, diabetes, and high blood pressure.

Wear sunglasses

Exposure to sunlight can damage your eyes. Protect your eyes by wearing sunglasses and brimmed hats.

Eat green leafy vegetables and fish

Eat an overall healthy diet, one that includes green leafy vegetables like kale and spinach, and fatty fish such as salmon and tuna. People with diets that include these foods are less likely to have AMD. These foods also promote overall health and eye health.

Keep up with appointments

This includes appointments with your eye doctor as well as your primary care physician, and any specialists you see to manage other health conditions. As mentioned above, diseases like obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease are associated with AMD. Keeping these conditions under control may help slow the progression of AMD, and are important to your overall health.

There are no known effective treatments for dry AMD, but nutritional supplements have been shown to slow progression of dry AMD for some people, and may be prescribed by a healthcare provider.

There are treatments available for wet AMD. The most commonly used is called anti-VEGF therapy, which utilizes injections of drugs that slow the growth of abnormal blood vessels. Less common therapy approaches for wet AMD include photodynamic therapy and laser surgery.