



Reduce Your Risk Factors for AMD to Protect and Preserve Your Vision

Age-related macular degeneration can destroy the sharp central vision you rely on for seeing clearly.

Recent research suggests that visual impairments may be associated with unintentional injury, depression, difficulty in physical activity, and a higher risk of falls and death in older adults. Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is the leading cause of vision loss in Americans 60 and older, and a new study, published in the January 2010 issue of the *American Journal of Ophthalmology*, underscores that smoking is a major risk factor even in people over age 80.

Quitting the habit lowers the risk of AMD in the oldest old, the study authors conclude. But that's also true for adults of all ages, says R.V. Paul Chan, MD, FACS, assistant professor of ophthalmology and director of the Surgical Vitreoretinal Fellowship at Weill Cornell Medical College.

"The biggest risk factor for AMD is increased age. However, quitting smoking and living a healthy lifestyle are incredibly important for reducing your risk of getting the vision-robbing disease," Dr. Chan stresses.



Photos: National Eye Institute, National Institutes of Health

Signs and symptoms

AMD destroys the sharp, central vision you need to see objects clearly and for activities such as reading and driving. In some cases, AMD advances so slowly that people notice little change in their vision. In others, the disease progresses faster and may lead to a loss of vision in both eyes.

There are two forms of AMD—dry and wet. The dry form (usually less severe) causes thinning of the retina (the light-sensitive tissue at the back of the eye) and yellow deposits called drusen. Blurred vision that may go away in brighter light is an early sign of dry AMD.

Drusen can stimulate the formation of new blood vessels in the eye that leak fluid or bleed—the more advanced “wet” form of AMD. Straight lines that appear crooked are an early symptom.

“When you have dry AMD, you can still lose vision,” Dr. Chan cautions. The dry form also can turn into the wet form, and as there is no definitive way to tell if or when this may occur, this puts you at greater risk of vision loss.

Prevention

You can't change your age, gender (women are more likely than men to develop AMD), race (Caucasians are most vulnerable), family history, or genes, all of which can contribute to your risk of AMD. But you can make lifestyle changes that will reduce your chances significantly. “Heart-risk factors—mainly high

blood pressure and smoking—are among the biggest issues,” Dr. Chan says. “Controlling these can help decrease your risk of vision loss.”

Studies have shown that smoking increases the risk of AMD two- to five-fold, possibly by reducing

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antioxidant levels and constricting blood vessels, which limits blood flow to the retina. Other lifestyle factors for AMD include:

- A high-fat diet that's low in nutrients and antioxidants.
- Obesity—an individual whose body mass index (BMI, a measure of body fat) is greater than 30 is 2.5 times more likely to get AMD.
- Inactivity—regular physical activity improves cardiovascular health and blood flow to the eyes.

Follow a healthy lifestyle and have regular eye exams—every every year or two at age 65 and older—that include a visual acuity test, a dilated eye exam, and tonometry to measure eye pressure.

If you're high risk for advanced AMD (for example, if you have intermediate AMD in one or both eyes, or if you have advanced AMD in one

eye but not the other), you may benefit from taking a special formulation of antioxidants called AREDS, which contains 500 milligrams (mg) of vitamin C, 400 International Units (IU) of vitamin E, 15 mg of beta-carotene (25,000 IU of vitamin A), 80 mg of zinc as zinc oxide, and 2 mg of copper as cupric oxide. AREDS has been shown to lower the risk of progressing from intermediate to advanced AMD.

However, you shouldn't take AREDS simply because you're worried about getting AMD, Dr. Chan says. "Discuss AREDS with your ophthalmologist to see if it's appropriate for you," he urges.

Treatment options for wet AMD may include laser therapy, photodynamic therapy (drugs and light), and injectable drugs. These may help stem the progression of AMD, but they won't cure the disease or restore lost vision. 🍌

WHAT YOU CAN DO

To reduce your risk of age-related macular degeneration:

- Eat plenty of green leafy vegetables, as these contain lutein and zeaxanthin, antioxidants which may lower the risk of AMD.
- Eat fatty fish twice a week to benefit from the omega-3s it contains.
- Maintain a normal blood pressure—120/80 mm Hg is the ideal, but your target may vary if you have a health issue such as diabetes.