

Early age-related macular degeneration

Information for people who have been told they have early age-related macular degeneration.

This leaflet is available on audio CD.

You don't have to face macular disease alone.
For the best information and support call us on
0300 3030 111.

This leaflet explains what it means to have 'early' age-related macular degeneration (AMD), how it affects you and what you can do to protect your vision.

What is AMD?

AMD is a common eye condition in older people (usually over the age of 55). Many more people are developing AMD as we are living longer and the older you are, the more likely you are to get it.

AMD affects the most important part of the retina at the back of the eye – the macula. The macula is at the centre

of the retina and has a very dense concentration of light-sensitive cells called photoreceptors.

The macula is vital for all our central vision, much of our colour vision and the fine detail of what we see. When the macula becomes severely damaged, people find it hard to read or recognise faces. Peripheral (side) vision is not usually affected.

The causes of macular degeneration are not fully understood, but increasing age, our genes and various lifestyle factors are known to increase the chances of developing it.

What is early AMD?

All parts of the body change as we age. It is normal to see differences in the way the retina looks in older people. There may be changes to the colour of the retina or tiny, fatty deposits called drusen may appear.

Some people have more significant changes to their retina, for example, quite a lot of small drusen, several large drusen or bigger areas of colour abnormality. These people may be diagnosed with 'early' AMD.

It's important to note that many people with

early AMD will never develop sight loss, as the progress of the disease varies considerably between individuals.

Detecting early AMD

Until quite recently, most people with AMD would not know they had it until it began to affect their sight.

Nowadays, very sophisticated eye scanning machines are increasingly available in high street opticians and this is leading to more diagnoses of early AMD.

People over 60 are entitled to free eye tests. An eye test is

recommended every two years if you are over 60, and every year if you are over 70. Examination of the macula is a part of this free examination.

How can I stop AMD developing?

If you are told you have early AMD, there are some things you can do to reduce the likelihood of the disease progressing.

If you smoke, stop. Smokers are four times more likely to develop AMD than non-smokers. Smoking kills the cells of the retina, reduces the delivery of oxygen and nutrients to the eye

and damages blood vessels. Smoking causes AMD to progress faster and makes treatment less effective.

Take moderate exercise to maintain a healthy weight and normal blood pressure.

Eat a healthy diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables, especially green, leafy vegetables. These contain nutrients that are thought to be important to eye health.

Some experts recommend nutritional supplements for people with AMD. However, the evidence for this is considered weak by

other experts. The best evidence is from two large studies, the Age-Related Eye Disease Studies (AREDS) 1 and 2.

See our 'Nutrition and eye health' leaflet for more about AREDS, diet and supplements.

If you decide to take a supplement, consult your GP first, especially if you are taking other medication.

Unfortunately, taking these precautions does not prevent AMD progressing in everyone. If the disease does progress, your vision will be affected to some extent.

Types of AMD

There are two types of AMD; dry and wet.

Dry

Over a period of months or even years, a person may find it harder to adapt from light to dark surroundings.

Colours may start to fade or central vision might become blurred. Eventually gaps can appear in the vision as photoreceptors die and are not replaced.

This is known as 'dry' AMD. There is currently no medical treatment for dry AMD but there is ongoing research.

There is also a large variety of equipment now available to help people continue their lives. See our 'Lighting' and 'Low vision' leaflets for more information.

Wet

Some people go on to develop 'wet' AMD. This is when tiny abnormal blood vessels grow into the retina. These leak blood and fluid which scars the macula.

The first sign of wet AMD could be a sudden change in vision or seeing distortion; straight lines may become wavy or objects look smaller than is natural.

To treat wet AMD, drugs are injected into the eye to reduce the growth of abnormal blood vessels.

Monitoring your vision

If you have early AMD it is a good idea to monitor your vision every week or so to spot changes early. You can do this very simply by closing one eye and looking at window frames or door posts to see if there is any distortion.

Wet AMD is very aggressive and needs urgent hospital treatment.

Whatever the stage of your AMD, if you have sudden changes to your vision, see your optometrist urgently – the same day if possible. If they suspect you have wet AMD, you should be referred to a hospital retinal specialist and be seen within two weeks.

Beating Macular Disease

Macular disease is the biggest cause of sight loss in the UK, with around 300 people diagnosed every day.

The Macular Society is the only charity determined to beat the fear and isolation of

macular disease with world-class research, and the best advice and support.

We provide a range of services, including:

- Advice and Information Service 0300 3030 111
- Macular Society Support Groups
- Counselling Service
- Telephone Befriending Service
- Treatment Buddies
- Skills for Seeing training
- Advocacy Service
- Working-Age and Young People Service

Can we support you?

If you are living with macular disease or have recently been diagnosed, we are here to help. We can support you, whatever stage you are at. Try our **six months free membership**, which includes:

- Sideview, a magazine packed with news, research updates, inspirational stories, tips and advice
- our monthly e-newsletter.

To join, go to macularsociety.org/sixmonthsfree or call **01264 350 551**.

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