What is age-related macular degeneration (AMD) and who’s at risk?

Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is a chronic, slow, progressive and painless condition that causes the cells in the macula to break down, leading to loss of central vision. The macula is the area of the retina where the photoreceptors are most dense. Like a camera, the retina is the film of the eye that receives images from the other ocular structures. The retina then sends impulses to the brain for interpretation. The macula provides us with central vision and allows us to see fine details such as those on faces, the television, computers and books.

There are two types of AMD: dry AMD and wet AMD. Dry AMD occurs when dry yellowish deposits accumulate beneath the macula. It is the less destructive type and accounts for 90% of AMD cases. Dry AMD usually does not cause a total loss of vision, but it must be closely monitored. Dry AMD can lead to wet AMD.

Wet AMD accounts for 10% of the cases, and it occurs when tiny abnormal blood vessels begin to grow behind the retina and leak blood and fluids that damage the macula. A person’s quality of vision decreases as the macula deteriorates.

In the early stages of AMD, there may not be any symptoms. In the later stages, a person may notice the following symptoms:

- Objects, print and faces may become blurry, hazy or distorted
- You may notice a blind spot in the center of your vision
- You may need more light to read
- While reading, some of the letters or words may be missing
- Colors may not seem as vivid
- Straight lines may appear wavy

Quick fact:

AMD cannot be prevented, but the effects of AMD can be minimized through early detection and treatment.
Regular eye exams are the only way to detect and monitor macular degeneration, as symptoms often go unnoticed. During the exam, your doctor will check your visual acuity and will use a special magnifying lens to look through the pupil of your eye to directly examine your retina. The doctor will look for signs of AMD and other diseases.

Early signs of systemic diseases such as hypertension and diabetes can also be detected during an eye exam. Early detection may prevent further vision loss, since treatment is only effective when started early. If your eye doctor suspects a problem, further testing will be required. Retinal photography, scanning computerized diagnostic tests and fluorescein angiography may be needed to determine the extent of AMD.

The main risk factor for developing AMD is age. Other risk factors include diet and nutrition, overexposure to sunlight, smoking, genetic factors, gender, race, high blood pressure, and diabetes.

The American Optometric Association and Prevent Blindness America recommend the following to reduce your risk of developing AMD:

- Protect your eyes from the sun by wearing sunglasses that block out 100% of UV light
- Stop smoking — AMD is twice as common in people who smoke
- Maintain a nutritionally balanced diet
- Eat foods or take supplements that contain antioxidants
- Avoid trans fats
- Control your blood pressure and cholesterol
- Stay active and exercise
- Routinely visit your eye care professional for comprehensive eye exams

Modern technology has improved the level of care provided to people with retinal disease. People older than age 50 should have a comprehensive eye exam every year.

Source: www.AMDawareness.org

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