



# A Common Eye Disease You Can Take Steps To Prevent

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ALTON - Macular degeneration is a disease many of us have heard of but may not know much about. So, it may be surprising to hear that the disorder significantly impacts the vision of millions of people in the U.S. – and that there are steps to help prevent it.

Macular degeneration is an eye disease that damages the central part of the retina, called the macula, which is the tissue at the back of the eye that is responsible for sharp, straight-ahead vision. At first, macular degeneration may go unnoticed, but as it advances, vision loss can get increasingly worse and have a real effect on people's daily routines and quality of life.

“It impacts independence and the ability to read, write, drive a car and watch TV,” said Dr. Johanna Seddon, director of the Macular Degeneration Center of Excellence at the University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School.

“And most important to many patients, they’re not able to recognize family members and other people they love.”

The disease is more common as people age. Rare in those under age 40, the risk of macular degeneration begins to increase in people in their 50s and 60s, and most cases are diagnosed in those 70 and older. Family history also plays an important role in the disease. If your mother or father has had macular degeneration, for example, you are at increased risk. But research shows there are important steps most of us can take that can help lower the risk of the disease, whether we have a family history or not.

“Not smoking is probably most important,” Seddon said. “Other steps include exercising, maintaining a healthy weight, and eating more green, leafy vegetables, like spinach, collard greens, and kale.”

Getting eye exams is also key for eye health, especially as you age, or if you have a family history of eye disease. This can help find macular degeneration earlier so it can be better managed over time.

In people who’ve already been diagnosed with later stages of macular degeneration, taking specific supplements have been found to slow down vision loss from the disease. “These formulations are often labeled ‘eye vitamins,’ and contain antioxidants, such as lutein, zeaxanthin, vitamins C and E, and zinc,” Seddon continued.

Talk to an eye doctor or other healthcare provider for more information about such supplements. Other treatments can actually help improve vision in those with advanced macular degeneration but are now available for only one of the two main types of the disease, called “wet type.” While there are no treatments for the other type of macular degeneration, “dry type,” promising studies are underway.

For those with significant vision loss due to either type of the disease, there are practical steps that can help with maintaining daily routines and overall well-being. “We recommend what we call ‘visual rehab,’ where people are evaluated for magnifiers and other visual aids, like high-contrast knobs on ovens, and they can also get instruction on how to prevent falls, which is a real danger when someone loses depth perception,” Seddon said.

As the population grows and gets older overall, macular degeneration is expected to become an increasingly important condition, with a wide-reaching impact on individuals and their families and caregivers. But research continues to work to find more and better treatment options. Also, a number of healthy behaviors can help lower the risk of developing the disease in the first place. And that's clearly some good news.

It's your health. Take control.

*Dr. Graham A. Colditz, associate director of prevention and control at Siteman Cancer Center at Barnes-Jewish Hospital and Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, is an internationally recognized leader in cancer prevention and the creator of the free prevention tool, <http://yourdiseaserisk.com/>. Alton Memorial Hospital is a member of the Siteman Cancer Network.*