

How to spot and prevent AMD - the leading cause of blindness in the UK

Top eye-care tips



THE COLLEGE
OF OPTOMETRISTS

Age-related Macular Degeneration (AMD) is the most common cause of blindness in the UK, affecting an estimated 500,000 people. Although the condition may not make itself apparent until later in life, preventative measures can be started much earlier.

Dr Susan Blakeney, Optometric Adviser at the College of Optometrists, says: “AMD already affects a large number of people in the UK, and as the population gets older more and more people will suffer. But there are a number of steps everyone can take right now to limit the onset of the condition, some of which are as simple as stopping smoking and wearing sunglasses in bright light. It is also important to visit to your local optometrist at least every two years or as advised by your optometrist.”

AMD affects central vision and is caused when cells in the macula, a small area of the retina at the back of the eye, are damaged or break down. Sufferers can retain some peripheral vision, but ongoing deterioration of central vision can eventually lead to the loss of the ability to recognise faces, drive and watch television - i.e. legal blindness.

Distortion of central vision, fuzzy lines and shapes and sensitivity to light can all be symptoms that your macula is beginning to deteriorate. There may be a dark spot in the centre of your vision, and you may see shapes and lights that are not really there.

Women are more likely to develop AMD than men and those with immediate family members with the disease are more susceptible to the condition.

What can I do to prevent or limit my chances of getting AMD?

- **Visit an optometrist at least once every two years or as advised by your optometrist.** As well as testing your eyes and prescribing glasses and contact lenses, your local optometrist is the front line in the battle for eye health. They are professionally trained to provide eye-care and spot potential problems such as AMD, as well as refer people on for specialist treatment if required and assist with the ongoing management of the condition through, for example, prescribing low-vision aids such as magnifiers.
- **Stop smoking** - smoking damages the cells in your retina, and more than doubles the risk of AMD.
- **Wear sunglasses and wide-brimmed hats in bright sunlight** - protect your retina from the impact of harmful UV rays. Good quality sunglasses with 100% UVA protection are important. Make sure your sunglasses conform to the relevant standards (if in doubt, ask your optometrist). People with light-coloured eyes have retinas that are particularly susceptible to the damaging UV effects

of light, and should be especially vigilant in protecting their eyes.

- **Eat healthily** - a poor diet with a high level of fats and low level of vitamins can make AMD worse, so give junk food a break, and make sure you are eating the right vitamins and minerals. Research suggests that diets rich in carotenoids found in leafy green vegetables, such as raw carrot, broccoli and raw spinach can reduce the risk of AMD.
- **Be aware of any distortion in your vision** - you can do this by covering one eye at a time and checking that you see straight lines as straight - for example a door or window frame. If you notice any distortion, do consult your optometrist.

What do I need to do if I think I have AMD?

If you feel that you are having a problem with your eyesight, visit your local optometrist as soon as possible.

What is AMD?

The macula is a small area at the centre of the retina, a delicate tissue that converts light into images and sends them to the brain. It is responsible for what we see straight in front of us, allowing us to read, write and see colour. When the fragile cells of the macula become damaged, they can stop working, and may lead to blindness.

There are two types of AMD: 'wet' and 'dry'. (This describes what the optometrist sees when they look at the macula, not how the eye feels). Dry AMD develops slowly, and causes gradual loss of central vision. There is no medical treatment for this, but can be aided with the right glasses and equipment. Wet AMD is caused when new blood vessels grow behind the retina, causing bleeding and scarring, and sometimes leading to complete loss of central vision. This can develop quickly, and can sometimes be treated. It accounts for approximately 10 per cent of people with AMD.

AMD usually affects both eyes, although one may be affected before the other. This makes it difficult to notice because sight in the 'good' eye compensates for loss of sight in the affected eye.

Causes

While the causes of AMD have not been identified, the risk factors below are known to play a part:

- Age - growing older can increase the risk of getting AMD
- Genetics - the condition can be passed on within families
- UV rays - prolonged exposure to sunlight can affect the retina
- Smoking - increases the likelihood of developing AMD
- Nutrition - a lack of essential vitamins and minerals can damage the macula