

Age Related Macular Degeneration (AMD)

Age related macular degeneration (AMD) is one of the most common causes of poor vision after age 60. AMD is a deterioration or breakdown of the macula. The macula is a small area at the center of the retina in the back of the eye that allows us to see fine details clearly and perform activities such as reading and driving.

The visual symptoms of AMD involve loss of central vision. While peripheral (side) vision is unaffected, one loses the sharp, straight-ahead vision necessary for driving, reading, recognizing faces, and looking at detail.

Although the specific cause is unknown, AMD seems to be part of aging. While age is the most significant risk factor for developing AMD, heredity, blue eyes, high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, and smoking have also been identified as risk factors. AMD accounts for 90 percent of new legal blindness in the US.

Nine out of 10 people who have AMD have the dry form (called atrophic), which results in thinning of the macula. Dry AMD takes many years to develop. Currently there is no treatment for this form of AMD.

The wet form of AMD (called exudative) is less common (occurring in one out of 10 people with AMD), but is more serious. In the wet form of AMD, abnormal blood vessels may grow in a layer beneath the retina, leaking fluid and blood and creating distortion or a large blind spot in the center of your vision. If the blood vessels are not growing directly beneath the macula, laser surgery is the only proven effective treatment, to date, for wet AMD. The procedure usually does not improve vision but prevents further loss of vision. For those wet AMD patients whose blood vessels are growing directly under the center of the macula, a procedure called photodynamic therapy (PDT) may be used to treat some patients with fewer visual side effects than other treatments.

Promising AMD research is being done on many fronts. In the meantime, high-intensity reading lamps, magnifiers and other low-vision aids help people with AMD make the most of their remaining vision.