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Prevention is Key in Avoiding Macular Degeneration

By Dr. Orkan George Stasior, MD, FACS, certified nutrition specialist and CDPHP-participating Ophthalmologist

Every three minutes another American is diagnosed with dreaded, sight-robbing macular degeneration. This condition is essentially associated with aging. The dry form (90%) causes slow but progressive deterioration of eyesight over the years, and the wet form (10%) causes much more rapid and severe loss of vision. One in six Americans between the ages of fifty-five and sixty-five and one in three over age seventy-five are affected. Each year another 1.2 million people are added to the estimated 15-17 million seniors who have some degree of macular degeneration.

That is the bad news. The good news is that there are things we can do to prevent, retard, or even restore loss of vision from macular degeneration especially if treated early.

The eye is a very complex organ which requires a tremendous supply of blood and high-quality nutrients. All of the following have been associated with an increased incidence of macular degeneration: unprotected eye exposure to sunlight, smoking, cardiovascular disease, narrowing of the carotid arteries, hypertension, diets high in saturated and trans fats, inadequate nutrition, excessive alcohol intake, increased body weight, and lack of exercise. These factors essentially decrease blood and nutrient supply to the eyes.

It is of the utmost importance that people have regular, thorough eye exams, and receive advice on ways to reduce their risk of macular degeneration. The following are examples:

- When Outdoors, always wear glasses with 100% protection of ultraviolet A and B. Near water and other reflective surfaces, use wraparound sunglasses. Wear a wide brimmed hat for extra protection.
- Do not smoke. Avoid secondhand smoke.
- Exercise regularly, doing something enjoyable.
- Eat a diet that daily includes green leafy and nutrient-rich vegetables, antioxidants, and omega 3 essential fatty acids.
- Take a high-quality multivitamin and mineral supplement which contains the carotenoids lutein and zeaxanthin.

It is estimated that at least 20% to 30% of Americans live on fast food, soft drinks, alcohol, and countless chemical additives. We need to steer our patients into eating healthier diets that include omega 3 essential fatty acids and multi-colored fruits and vegetables.

Omega 3 essential fatty acids contain docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) and eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA). Daily intake is critical. DHA is an important building block of the retina. We cannot manufacture it. Although both omega 3 and omega 6 are necessary, they should be in a ratio of 1:1 or 1:2. Currently the ratio is 1:20 to 1:40 in many of our patients.

Omega 3 with DHA is obtained from



coldwater fish such as wild salmon, mackerel, herring, sardines, anchovies, and tuna. Vegetarian sources include algae, flaxseed meal and oil, and several types of nuts including walnuts and almonds. The vegetable sources of omega 3 are harder for the body to convert to DHA.

The carotenoids lutein (present in dark green leafy vegetables) and zeaxanthin (predominant in many yellow, orange, and red fruits and vegetables) play a triple protective role. They are antioxidants and act as a sun block for the macular photoreceptors.

We should stress the fact that there is hope, and inform our patients of the encouraging results of the Age-Related Eye Disease Study (AREDS) sponsored by the National Eye Institute (NEI), one of the National Institutes of Health. In 2001, this five-year study showed a 19% reduction in risk of vision loss and a 25% reduction in progression of advanced macular degeneration in patients taking antioxidants and zinc supplements. The results would have been even better if lutein and zeaxanthin had been commercially available at the time.

