

Age-related macular degeneration



Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is a common cause of vision loss in elderly people. It occurs in two forms with dry AMD being the more common (90%) and the less problematic of the two. Wet AMD can cause sudden and severe vision loss. Wet AMD can be treated with laser surgery, but may well recur.

What is AMD?

The macula is in the centre of the retina, the light-sensitive layer of tissue at the back of the eye. As you read, light is focused onto your macula. There, millions of cells change the light into nerve signals that tell the brain what you are seeing. This is called your central vision. AMD can cause significant loss of central vision but does not affect peripheral vision.

Because only this area of your vision is usually affected, people rarely go blind from the disease. However, AMD can sometimes make it difficult to read, drive, or perform other daily activities that require fine, central vision.

There are two types of AMD

Dry AMD affects about 90% of those with the disease. Its cause is unknown. Slowly, the light sensitive cells in the macula break down. With less of the macula working, you may start to lose central vision in the affected eye as the years go by. Dry AMD often occurs in just one eye at first. You may get the disease later in the other eye.

Although only 10% of all people with AMD have **wet AMD**, it accounts for 90% of all severe vision loss from the disease. It occurs when new blood vessels behind the retina start to grow toward the macula. Because these new blood vessels tend to be very fragile, they will often leak blood and fluid under the macula. This causes rapid damage to the macula that can lead to the loss of central vision in a short period of time.

The risk factors for AMD

- **Age.** Although AMD can occur during middle age, the risk increases as a person gets older.
- **Gender.** Women may be at greater risk than men, according to some studies.
- **Smoking.** Smoking may increase the risk of AMD.
- **Family history.** People with a family history of AMD may be at higher risk of getting the disease.
- **Cholesterol.** People with elevated levels of blood cholesterol may be at higher risk for wet AMD.

Treating AMD

Dry AMD currently cannot be treated. But this does not mean that you will lose your sight. Fortunately, dry AMD develops very slowly. You may lose some of your central vision over the years. However, most people are able to lead normal, active lives - especially if AMD affects only one eye.

Some cases of wet AMD can be treated with laser surgery. The treatment involves aiming a high-energy beam of light directly onto the leaking blood vessels to reduce, or stop, the leak. It is important to realise that laser surgery is not a cure for AMD. It is only a treatment to help stop further vision loss. The risk of new blood vessels growing back after treatment is relatively high.

If you have noticed any changes to your vision, it's essential to see your optometrist about them.