

AMD (Age-related macular degeneration)

What is AMD (Age-related macular degeneration)?

The macula is a very small part of the retina, which is the light-sensitive tissue at the back of the eye. The macula is responsible for the detailed sharp vision that is used for reading, driving and seeing fine detail. AMD generally occurs as a result of changes in the macula due to ageing, which cause your central vision to blur. Your peripheral vision remains unaffected.

How will I know if I have AMD?

AMD causes no pain or discomfort and commonly progresses slowly. In its early stages, AMD may be detected in an eye test before symptoms occur. The first symptom is typically difficulty seeing fine detail in the centre of your vision and over time, this central area may increase in size. In some cases, AMD may cause lines to appear distorted or wavy.

What causes AMD?

There are two types of AMD: dry and wet. The dry form is more common and less severe. It causes a gradual deterioration in your central vision over time. Dry AMD accounts for 90 per cent of all AMD but can change into the wet type over time. The wet-form is less common and occurs when a blood vessel underneath the macula leaks and symptoms can progress rapidly. This type needs urgent treatment.

Who gets AMD?

The major risk for developing AMD is age, with one in seven people over 50 years affected. Smoking is the major controllable risk factor with smokers having twice the risk of developing AMD. You should have an eye test which checks for the signs and symptoms of AMD if you:

- are older than 50 years
- are a smoker
- have hypertension or cardiovascular disease
- have a family history of AMD
- have a history of UV exposure

How does an Optometrist diagnose AMD? As part of your eye examination your Optometrist will check the macula at the back of the eye. It is common for your Optometrist to put eye-drops in your eyes when checking for AMD. They may need to take a photograph of your macula for comparison at your next eye examination.

Can AMD be treated?

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There is currently no treatment for dry AMD and those with dry AMD need regular eye tests to ensure the wet form does not develop. A new treatment for wet AMD is now available in which an ophthalmologist injects anti-VEGF into the eye. When injected into the eye, anti-VEGF prevents the growth of the abnormal leaky blood vessels. Anti-VEGF therapy is the first treatment of AMD that has been shown to improve vision in some cases. The treatment needs to be repeated, commonly each month, as part of the ongoing treatment of the disease.

This treatment aims to keep the best vision for as long as possible. The early detection of any form of AMD is important because the earlier AMD is detected and treated, the better your vision is likely to be in future.

Regular eye examinations are your best protection against vision loss from AMD.