**Most Americans Unaware of One of the Leading Causes of Blindness Among Seniors**

[Age-Related Macular Degeneration](https://www.aao.org/eye-health/diseases/amd-macular-degeneration) is one of the leading causes of blindness among seniors, affecting approximately 2.1 million people nationwide[[1]](#footnote-1). By 2050, it is expected that the number will more than double to 5.4 million[[2]](#footnote-2). People may be putting themselves at unnecessary risk of vision loss by neglecting to have sight-saving eye exams. Throughout February, Retina Specialists joins the [American Academy of Ophthalmology](https://www.aao.org/) in emphasizing AMD awareness and encouraging those who are most at risk to ensure the health of their eyes by getting an eye exam from an ophthalmologist – a physician who specializes in the medical and surgical treatment of eye diseases and conditions.

AMD is a degenerative disease that damages the [retina](https://www.aao.org/eye-health/diseases/detached-torn-retina), which is the light-sensitive tissue at the back of the eye that focuses images and relays information to the brain. Over time, retinal damage can lead to permanent loss of central vision, limiting the ability to drive, read and recognize faces.

There are two forms AMD – wet and dry. While the dry form of AMD leads to gradual vision loss, the wet form progresses at a faster rate and is responsible for 90 percent of all AMD-related blindness. Recent advancements in treatment options have significantly decreased the incidence of blindness. However, it is critical to get diagnosed and begin treatment as soon as possible to protect vision.

The Academy recommends the following steps to help potentially avoid AMD and other eye diseases:

* **Get regular comprehensive medical eye exams.** AMD often has no early warning signs, so getting regular [comprehensive eye exams](https://www.aao.org/eye-health/tips-prevention/eye-exams-101) from an ophthalmologist is critical to diagnosing and treating the eye disease in its early stages. The Academy recommends that people over age 65 get an exam every one to two years, even if they have no symptoms of eye problems.
* **Quit smoking.** Numerous studies have shown [smoking](https://www.aao.org/eye-health/tips-prevention/smokers) to increase the risk of developing AMD and the speed at which it progresses. If you smoke, you are twice as likely to develop macular degeneration compared with a nonsmoker[[3]](#footnote-3).
* **Know your family’s eye health history.** If you have a close relative with AMD, you have a 50 percent greater chance of developing the condition. Before you go in for your next eye exam, [speak with your family about their eye health history](https://www.aao.org/eye-health/tips-prevention/family-reunions). Sharing this information with your ophthalmologist may prompt him or her to recommend more frequent eye exams. The earlier AMD is caught, the better chances you may have of saving your vision.
* **Eat a diet rich in omega-3s and low in cholesterol and saturated fat.** Several studies have shown that people who had a reduced risk of AMD had [diets rich in omega-3 fatty acids](https://www.aao.org/eye-health/tips-prevention/fish-vitamin-d-rich-foods-amd), such as fish. In one study of patients who were at moderate risk for AMD progression, those who reported the highest omega-3 intake (not in the form of a supplement) were 30 percent less likely to develop advanced AMD after 12 years. In another study, an increased risk of AMD was found in individuals who had a higher intake of saturated fats and cholesterol and in those with a higher body mass index[[4]](#footnote-4).
* **Exercise regularly.** Many studies have shown that [getting regular exercise can benefit your eyes](https://www.aao.org/eye-health/tips-prevention/exercise-eyes-vision-4). One study found that exercising three times a week reduced the risk of developing wet AMD over 15 years by 70 percent[[5]](#footnote-5).

“Most people understand the importance of annual medical examinations," said Rahul N. Khurana, M.D., a clinical spokesperson for the American Academy of Ophthalmology. “However, we often forget that our eyes also need regular evaluation by a medical doctor. Degenerative diseases, such AMD, can now be successfully treated, but early detection is imperative to avoid lasting consequences."

**EyeCare America® Helps Save Seniors’ Sight**

As seniors age, many will develop eye diseases that can become debilitating if not treated in time, such as AMD. The American Academy of Ophthalmology’s EyeCare America® program may be able to help. This year-round program is designed for seniors, age 65 and older, who have not seen an ophthalmologist in three or more years. Through EyeCare America, seniors may receive a free medical eye examination by ophthalmologists across the country who volunteer their time and services. To see if you or a loved one is eligible, visit [eyecareamerica.org](http://eyecareamerica.org/).

This program is co-sponsored by the Knights Templar Eye Foundation Inc., with additional support provided by Alcon, Genentech, and Regeneron. As one of the largest public service programs in American medicine, EyeCare America was recognized in 2015 by the President’s Volunteer Service Award, which is the premier volunteer awards program in the United States.

For more information on age-related macular degeneration or other eye conditions and diseases, visit the American Academy of Ophthalmology’s [EyeSmart®](https://www.aao.org/eye-health) website.

1. <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/international-study-reveals-new-genetic-clues-age-related-macular-degeneration> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/international-study-reveals-new-genetic-clues-age-related-macular-degeneration> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.cdc.gov/features/smoking-eyesight/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.aao.org/preferred-practice-pattern/age-related-macular-degeneration-ppp-2015> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://bjo.bmj.com/content/90/12/1461> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)