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Age Related Macular Degeneration (AMD)

Age related macular degeneration (ARMD) is one of the most common causes of poor vision after age 60. ARMD 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 ARMD 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, ARMD seems to be part of aging in certain individuals. While age is the most significant risk factor for developing ARMD, heredity, blue eyes, high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, and smoking have also been identified as risk factors. ARMD accounts for 90 percent of new legal blindness in the US.

Nine out of 10 people who have ARMD have the dry form (called atrophic), which results in atrophy or thinning of the macula. Dry ARMD takes many years to develop. Currently there is no treatment for this form of ARMD, but research supports the use of certain supplements including vitamins A, C, E, and Zinc in specific cases. Control of vascular diseases, diabetes, and stopping smoking are important.

The wet form of ARMD (called exudative) is less common (occurring in about one out of 10 people with ARMD), but is more serious. In the wet form of ARMD, abnormal blood vessels grow under the retina, leaking fluid and blood and creating distortion or a blind spot in the center of your vision. New treatments for ARMD include Lucentis and Avastin, medicines injected into the eye which cause the new vessels to atrophy. Repeated treatments are often necessary. These are showing improved outcomes but still require early detection for best results. Laser surgery may be done to ablate certain types of ARMD and can be carried out in conjunction with other therapeutic measures, including those above or with intravenous medications in a treatment known as photodynamic therapy (PDT). These are being utilized infrequently as they are less effective. The procedure usually does not improve vision but often prevents further loss of vision.

Promising ARMD research is being done in universities worldwide on many fronts including for vision rehabilitation. In the meantime, specialized reading lamps, electronic and standard magnifiers and other low-vision aids help people with ARMD make the most of their remaining vision.