

Age-Related Macular Degeneration – What it is.

Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is an incurable eye disease that damages the macula, the small area near the center of the retina that contains a high concentration of light receptors (rods and cones). The macula is responsible for sharp, central vision and lets people see objects they are looking directly at.



This image simulates what a person with AMD sees: The central portion of the image is totally unusable, but the peripheral vision is still available (though blurry).

AMD is a slow-working disease and those with it might not notice any symptoms for years. Over time, however, the person's center of vision in the affected eye(s) becomes increasingly blurry. The blurred spots grow and blind spots can develop in the eye's field of vision over time. Eventually, central vision is lost altogether, rendering the person legally blind. They still might be able to see objects in their peripheral vision, but they can no longer read, see faces, drive safely, or do close work.

There are two types of AMD, dry and wet. The dry version, which accounts for 90% of all AMD cases, results from the slow breakdown of light-sensitive cells in the retina and the supporting tissue beneath the macula. The other type, wet AMD, accounts for 10% of AMD patients, and is also known as late-stage AMD. In this stage, abnormal blood vessels grow underneath the macula. The vessels often leak fluids and blood, leading to swelling and damage to the macula. The damage is severe and happens quickly, unlike the slower pace of dry AMD. But not everyone who gets dry AMD develops wet AMD.

People with early AMD in only one eye have a 5% chance of developing late-stage AMD within 10 years. Those with early AMD in both eyes run a 14% chance of developing late-stage AMD in at least one year after 10 years.

There is another form of macular degeneration called Stargardt disease. It is found in younger patients and is caused by a recessive gene. There is no cure for AMD, although high-dose vitamins and minerals and a healthy diet have been known to slow its progression. It's also recommended that those with AMD stop smoking. (Smoking doubles the chances a person will contract AMD.)

Other risk factors for contracting AMD include genetics; AMD does run in families, but researchers have identified 20 genes that affect the risk of developing AMD, and many more are suspected. That's why there are currently no genetic tests that reliably predict if someone will come down with it. AMD is also more common in Caucasians than among African-Americans, Asians, or Hispanics. But the largest risk factor is age: the older you get, the more likely you are to be afflicted by AMD.