

MEDIA RELEASE

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DIETARY CHANGE KEY TO SAVING SIGHT FOR THOUSANDS OF NZERS

Making simple dietary changes and stopping smoking could help to save thousands of New Zealanders' sight every year, according to a leading ophthalmologist.

Dr Dianne Sharp, Chairperson of Macular Degeneration New Zealand, says research shows that certain vitamins and minerals can help slow down the development of macular degeneration (MD) – New Zealand's leading cause of blindness and visual impairment in adults aged 50 and over.

Sometimes MD can also affect people aged younger than 50 (see our case study below). Macular degeneration is a chronic condition that has no cure. The most severe form develops abnormal blood vessels in the retina that leak or bleed, forming a scar that causes vision loss and blindness. This may progress rapidly – within week or months – causing severe vision loss.

Early detection and treatment is crucial to stop vision loss. Prompt treatment stabilises vision in over 90% of people with this severe form of MD. However, awareness is the key to ensure people recognise the early signs of MD and have regular eye checks, particularly if they are over 50 years old.

Dr Sharp says that that a major study¹ found that a diet rich in carotenoids, omega-3 fatty acids and fish products is associated with slowing down macular degeneration's progression. It also identified a specific formula of antioxidants that helps to slow the progression of age related MD in those who already have evidence of moderate to severe MD.

The daily dose formula (known as AREDS2) is zinc 80mg, vitamin C 500mg, vitamin E 400IU, copper 2mg, lutein 10mg and zeaxanthin 2mg. Any changes in diet and supplement should be made in consultation with your doctor.

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The study showed that taking the AREDS2 formula every day significantly reduced the relative risk of progression of MD and delayed visual loss.²

Dr Sharp says that while eating a balanced diet is the best way to obtain AREDS2 nutrients, many people could find it challenging because to get the same quantities as the AREDS2 formula they would need to eat the equivalent of around 135 g of oysters, 7 oranges and 123 tablespoons of wheat germ every day.

“AREDS formulated dietary supplements are a useful way of providing the right amounts but it is important to read the label to understand how many tablets need to be taken to match the AREDS2 formula and to discuss it with a qualified health practitioner before taking any supplement.”

She also advises people to stop smoking, moderate their alcohol intake and to eat fewer fatty foods.

Dr Sharp stresses that early detection is vital. Although nothing will cure the condition or reverse its damage, medical treatment, nutritional factors and healthy lifestyle choices will help to slow down or even halt MD’s progression.

The condition affects one in seven New Zealanders aged over 50. Its incidence increases dramatically with age. One in four people over 80 years of age has some vision loss as a result of MD. It is estimated the number of people with MD will increase by 70% over the next 15 years.

25 to 31 May is Macular Degeneration Awareness week. Visit www.mdnz.org.nz to take a simple test to see if it affects you.

Case study MD sufferer: fast diagnosis saved my sight

“Get blurry or distorted vision checked out as soon as possible because it could save your sight,” says Cambridge resident and macular degeneration sufferer, Pete Lewis.

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Eighteen months ago Pete awoke to blurred vision in his right eye, which persisted throughout the day. He promptly sought medical attention and discovered that he had developed macular degeneration.

“I was only 46 year old, which is uncommonly young but it just goes to show that it can strike at any age.”

There was no history of eye problems in his family and apart from myopia (short-sightedness) Pete’s eyes had always been fine, so the diagnosis came as a surprise.

Pete has had ongoing medical treatment, which has stopped the condition from getting any worse. As a result, he has been able to continue working and still leads a full life, including playing in a band and playing soccer. But his macular degeneration has still come at a cost.

He currently works in an earthmoving business but before that he was a roofer – something Pete would no longer be able to do because the condition can make it difficult to accurately judge distances: “working in roofing would be too dangerous, particularly when stepping between purlins (beams)”.

Pete says people – particularly men – need to be honest with themselves if there is something amiss with their vision.

“If you notice a wavy look to things like that have straight lines like fences, building cladding, etc., then get it checked without delay.

“Fortunately I wasn’t one of those guys who avoids going to the doctor and that saved my sight.”

-ENDS-

References

1. The Age Related Eye Disease Study (AREDS) was a major clinical trial conducted by the National Eye Institute in the USA. Visit: www.areds2.org for more information.

2. Those with intermediate stage MD reduced their risk by approximately 25%. Those with late stage MD in one eye reduced their risk by approximately 20%.

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