

MACULA DEGENERATION

What is the macular?

The macular is the important central area of the retina which is responsible for detailed central vision. It has the highest concentration of retinal receptor cells known as 'cones'

What is macular degeneration?

Sometimes the delicate cells of the macula become damaged and stop working. We do not know why this is, although it tends to happen as people get older. This is called age-related macular degeneration (AMD).

There are two forms of macular degeneration - '**Dry**' and '**Wet**'.

Dry AMD is the most common and milder form of the disease and is identified by the collection of yellow, fatty deposits called drusen, at the macular. Visual deterioration is generally gradual over a long period (5-20 years).

Wet AMD occurs much less frequently (in about 1 in 10 cases), but is the more severe form of the disease. Drusen occur but wet AMD is characterised by the development of abnormal leaky blood vessels at the macular which cause damage to the retina. Vision loss may occur suddenly and people often report distortion of straight lines as a symptom. In advanced cases of the 'wet' form of AMD there is scarring of the macula caused by the leaking blood vessels. This is called disciform maculopathy and can create irreversible 'blind spots' in the central vision.

Because macular degeneration is an age-related process it usually involves both eyes, although they may not be affected at the same time or to the same degree.

Children and young people can also suffer from an inherited form of macular degeneration called macular dystrophy. Sometimes several members of a family will suffer from this, and if this is the case in your family, it is very important that eyes are checked regularly.

Macular degeneration is not painful and never leads to total blindness. It is the most common cause of poor eyesight in people over 60, but never leads to complete sight loss because it is only the central vision that is affected. Macular degeneration never affects vision at the outer edges of the eye. This means that almost everyone with macular degeneration will have enough side vision to get around and keep his or her independence.

What are the symptoms?

In the early stages central vision may be blurred or distorted, with things looking an unusual size or shape. This may happen quickly or develop over several months. Other people simply find increasing difficulty reading very small print. You may be very sensitive to light or actually see lights that are not there. This may cause some discomfort occasionally, but otherwise macular degeneration is not painful.

The macula enables people to see fine details and those with the advanced condition will often notice a blank patch or dark spot in the centre of their sight. This makes activities like reading, writing and recognising small objects or faces very difficult.

What should I do if I think that I have macular degeneration?

If you suspect that you may have macular degeneration but there are no acute symptoms you should visit us. If necessary we will refer you to an eye specialist. If you have acute (sudden onset) symptoms then you should consult us, your doctor or local casualty department immediately.