

## Where there's smoke, there's sometimes blindness

By John Bell

We all know that smoking is a major risk factor for many diseases including heart and blood vessel disease, osteoporosis and various cancers.

Perhaps less well known is the fact that smoking causes blindness. Smokers and people who have smoked are three times more likely to develop macular degeneration.

The potentially serious adverse effects of smoking on our eyesight and the possible benefits of diet and exercise are just some of the messages to come from Macular Degeneration Awareness Week (26 May to 1 June).

Macular degeneration (MD) – sometimes known as age-related macular degeneration (AMD) because of its high prevalence in older people – is the leading cause of irreversible blindness in Australia and other Western countries.

It is the name given to a group of diseases of the retina which cause progressive, painless loss of central vision. Thus the ability to see fine detail, drive, read and recognise faces is slowly but surely lost.

Presently there is no cure for AMD; and treatments to delay or stop its progression have met with limited success. As AMD is so common (one in seven people over the age of 50 is affected) there is increasing interest in identifying risk factors which, when modified, may reduce the chance of getting AMD, or stop the condition becoming worse when it does occur.

A family history of macular degeneration gives us a 50% chance of developing the disease. We can't do too much to change our parents, so a regular and frequent check up by the eye specialist is important for early diagnosis.

Nevertheless, something we can address is a commitment to become a non-smoker. Many studies have clearly demonstrated the link between smoking and AMD.

There is ongoing debate about the relationship between AMD and obesity, high blood pressure and high cholesterol levels; but research strongly suggest that diet is significant.

There's probably still some doubt as to whether eating your crusts makes your hair grow curly. But there's no doubt the advice we got from our mums and grandmums with respect to vegetables was pretty accurate.

In particular the likelihood is that the pigments beta-carotene, lutein and zeaxanthin found in carrots, pumpkin, corn and some green leafy vegetables are beneficial. Other antioxidants of interest include vitamins A and E and the trace elements zinc and selenium.

Proprietary preparations containing these substances are now available, but the use of anti-oxidants in high doses is not without risk. Beta-carotene has been found to increase the risk of lung cancer in smokers; and vitamin E has been associated with an increased risk of heart failure in people with diabetes or disease affecting circulation. Check with your pharmacist before you choose a specific product.

On the other hand, there is evidence that fish oil (containing so-called omega-3 fatty acids) might provide protection against AMD. So, the Macular Degeneration Foundation advises eating fish two or three times a week, eating dark-green leafy vegetables and fresh fruit, eating a handful of nuts once a week and protecting your eyes from sunlight exposure; and of course, if you're a smoker, then quit! You can get more good advice from the Foundation at [www.mdfoundation.com.au](http://www.mdfoundation.com.au) And you can access a copy of their publication *Slips, Trips and Falls, and how to avoid them* - a guide for people with low vision.

Also, pharmacies around Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care health information have a fact card titled *Vision Impairment*. The card gives details about not only AMD but also glaucoma, cataracts, diabetic retinopathy, and refractive error.

To locate the Self Care pharmacy nearest you, log on to the Pharmaceutical Society (PSA) website at [www.psa.org.au](http://www.psa.org.au) and click on "use the self care pharmacy finder". Or phone PSA on 1300 369 772