

**The looming eye crisis:
78,000 new cases of AMD diagnosed annually are expected to triple in 25 years**

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EDMONTON - Canadians are losing sight in record numbers. The leading cause of vision loss is age-related macular degeneration (AMD), which can be prevented with early diagnosis, but only five per cent of the population knows this.

The problem is so great that a national education campaign about AMD, involving the CNIB, will kick off Wednesday, complete with a new web-site, www.amdcanada.com.

The good news is that outside of inherited factors, there are steps you can take to prevent AMD, the loss of central or detail vision in the centre part of the eye known as the retina.

Not smoking is one of them, of course. Maintaining healthy weight and blood pressure and reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease, eating lots of fruits and veggies -- especially the green kinds -- and wearing good sunglasses with UVA and B protection are the others.

Start doing this now and you'll reduce your risk for age-related macular degeneration (AMD), the leading cause of vision loss in people over the age of 50.

AMD CAUSES

"We call it an aging change -- the risk increases with age -- and we know what the physiological changes to the retina are, but we're not sure what actually stimulates the whole process," says Linda Uniat, a retinologist and associate clinical professor at the Regional Eye Centre at the Royal Alexandra Hospital.

Over 2.1 million Canadians have AMD and about 78,000 new cases are being diagnosed each year -- a number that is expected to triple in the next 25 years as aging baby boomers continue to rack up the birthdays.

At its worst, AMD can rob people of their total vision, but even less severe cases interfere with quality of life -- taking away a person's ability to read, watch TV or drive a car.

Helen Sarah Hatch, one of Uniat's patients, can no longer read a newspaper because the words run into each other. She can't do her beloved crosswords and word puzzles and she has had to stop knitting. The 86-year-old was diagnosed with AMD about 18 months ago when the vertical outlines of a door began to look warped to her.

"I thought at first I must be imagining it because I had just been to the doctor," Hatch said. Turns out she had wet macular degeneration in her left eye and dry macular degeneration in her right eye.

Dry macular degeneration affects 85 per cent of people with AMD and causes 10 to 20 per cent to lose total vision. Wet AMD affects the remaining 15 per cent of people with AMD.

Dry AMD comes on slowly with the accumulation of debris at the back of the retina, which is known as the macular, and may not even be noticed for a long time, Uniat explains.

Most people notice the wet form within a day or two because a blood vessel developing at the back of a retina will start to seep fluid, or bleed sometimes, suddenly creating blurred vision and distortion, which is what happened to Hatch.

It's very common for only one eye to be affected lulling people into thinking that the condition will go away, or that they still have one good eye so they can ignore it. But there is no cure for AMD and the sooner you seek medical treatment, the less damage to your vision, Uniat says.

Allen Eaton, 64, of Sherwood Park, noticed his vision was starting to falter six weeks ago and thought he just needed a change in the prescription of his glasses. An eye test found he had wet AMD in the back of his left eye.

"I have to sit closer to the TV to watch it and driving has become a little difficult," he says, but he is hopeful that a cold laser treatment to cauterize

the blood vessel and stop the bleeding, that he received from Uniat last week worked and will improve his sight. Eaton has to come back to see the doctor in three months and will have to undergo another laser treatment if needed.

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WHO'S AT RISK

- Smokers
- People with high blood pressure and heart disease
- Caucasians with light coloured eyes
- Women

RISK BY AGE

- 8.5 % between the ages of 43 & 54
- 14.4 % between the ages of 55 & 64
- 19.4 % between the ages of 65 & 74
- 36.8 % between the ages of 75 & 84

New website

A new Canadian website www.amdcanada.com, offering information about AMD is scheduled to begin operating today. A major education campaign involving the CNIB kicks off Wednesday.