

# Take Charge of Your Vision!

By Dr. Bruce P. Rosenthal

Age-related Macular Degeneration (AMD) is the leading cause of legal blindness in Americans over 50, yet a disease that few talked about until recently.

For years, many assumed vision loss was a natural result of aging. We are learning that this isn't the case. Much can be done to preserve vision through prevention, early detection via regular eye exams, treatment, vision rehabilitation, support services and research.

AMD is an eye disease that causes loss of central vision, leaving only peripheral vision intact. Possible warning signs of AMD include difficulty in distinguishing colors, blurry images, straight lines that appear distorted or wavy and central vision blocked by dark or empty spaces. Those affected by AMD often have trouble reading a book, driving a car and distinguishing faces and traffic signs.

An estimated 6 million Americans have vision loss from AMD and approximately 13 to 15 million Americans have pre-symptomatic signs of AMD. Some form of AMD affects 25 to 30 million people worldwide, and that number is predicted to double in the next 35 years.

Smoking is the only proven risk factor for AMD. Other possible risk factors include genetics, cataracts, hypertension, sun exposure, farsightedness, light skin or eye color and a diet low in vitamins, minerals and antioxidants.

Despite the prevalence of AMD, awareness remains quite low. A study commissioned by the AMD Alliance International revealed that only 3 percent of Americans surveyed think AMD is the leading cause of severe sight loss among adults 50 and older and 79 percent are not aware of any treatment options for the disease. (Research Source: Survey among representative samples of 6,591 adults from Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, United Kingdom and United States commissioned by AMD Alliance International, May 1999).

Every week, new AMD patients arrive at LIGHTHOUSE INTERNATIONAL claiming they were "dismissed" by their regular doctors with the words, "There is nothing more I can do for you." This is absolutely wrong. The field of low vision is advancing daily, and there are many ways to make the most of remaining sight.

Follow these initial steps, along with others recommended by your eye care provider, to take charge of your vision.

**Regular Eye Exams:** It is imperative that regular eye exams and tests (Amsler Grid) and early detection are a priority especially if there is a family history of this condition. This enables your eye care provider to discuss available options for treatment, rehabilitation and support services, as well as other recommendations for your specific lifestyle, diet and circumstances.

Treatment: Talk with your eye care provider to learn more about the two treatments that currently exist to treat some forms of wet AMD—photodynamic therapy and laser photocoagulation—as well as research on the horizon.

Vision Rehabilitation: Counseling and training help people with vision impairment to function independently. Discuss tools such as low vision aids and magnifiers, lighting, computer enhancements, large print publications, "talking" devices like books, watches and microwaves and practical daily living skills for reading, cooking, sewing and more.

Support Services: Reach out to find support groups of patients and vision experts in your local area.

Life does not end with a diagnosis of AMD. Today, it is possible to see better and live an active and rich life despite the loss of central vision.

If you have a friend or a loved one who has AMD or any other vision problem and could use some extra assistance, be sure to tell them about (home care, adult day care, assisted living, reverse mortgages, VA Aid and Attendance Pension Benefits) services in your area. Contact TOUCH OF HEAVEN SENIOR HOME CARE at 703-565-2114 for more information, or visit us on the web at [www.touchofheavenseniorhomecare.com](http://www.touchofheavenseniorhomecare.com).

*Dr. Rosenthal is chairman of AMD Alliance International and chief of Low Vision Programs at Lighthouse International. He is also an executive council member of the Low Vision Section of the American Optometric Association. He has written and lectured widely on visual impairment.*