

MACULAR DEGENERATION

You can reduce the risk

Macular degeneration is a condition in which the central part of the retina becomes damaged with a build-up of waste material that is usually removed from the retina and a breakdown of the membrane that separates the retina from the blood vessels behind it.

The condition affects central vision and the ability to see fine detail but allows some side vision. Advancing age is the major cause of macular degeneration but early treatment, sun protection and a balanced diet are key elements to reduce the risk of acquiring it.

Smoking is also a risk factor but unlike advancing age, it can be controlled. People who smoke are likely to develop the condition about 10 years earlier than the rest of the population.

Macular degeneration is difficult to treat because nerve tissue in the retina cannot



regenerate, unlike tissue in other parts of the body, and it is not possible to replace or repair the retina. In some severe forms of macular degeneration, laser surgery or injections into the eye may be used to seal leaking blood vessels behind the eye. These treatments do not cure the condition but can reduce the risk of future vision loss. It is very important to initiate treatment early.

The condition accounts for about 70 per cent of seriously impaired vision for people over the age of 70 years. Several studies have been undertaken to determine whether there is an association between developing macular degeneration and other factors such as diet and exposure to ultraviolet light.

Regular eye examinations are essential to detect macular degeneration in its early stages, especially for people over 50 years of age and those with a family history of eye problems.