

Mediterranean Diet Can Prevent Blindness

Evidence is mounting that a poor diet plays an important role in the development of [age-related macular degeneration \(AMD\)](#), a leading cause of blindness in the United States. A large collaboration of researchers from the European Union investigated the connection between genes and lifestyle on the development of AMD. **They found that people who adhered to a Mediterranean diet cut their risk of late-stage AMD by 41%.**

This research expands on previous studies and suggests that such a diet is beneficial for everyone, whether you already have the disease or are at risk of developing it. The new research is now online in *Ophthalmology*, the journal of the American Academy of Ophthalmology. A Mediterranean diet emphasizes eating less meat and more fish, vegetables, fruits, legumes, unrefined grains, and olive oil. Previous research has linked it to a longer lifespan and a reduced incidence of heart disease and cognitive decline. But only a few studies have evaluated its impact on AMD. Some studies had shown it helped only with certain types of AMD or only at different stages of the disease.

But if this earlier research on AMD is combined with the latest data, a clear picture emerges: Diet has the potential to prevent a blinding disease.

AMD is a degenerative [eye disease](#). It causes loss of central vision, which is crucial for simple everyday activities, such as the ability to see faces, drive, read and write. It's a leading cause of vision loss among people age 50 and older, affecting 1.8 million Americans. By 2020, that number is expected to climb to nearly 3 million.

For this latest study, researchers analyzed food-frequency questionnaires from nearly 5,000 people who participated in two previous investigations—the Rotterdam Study, which evaluated disease risk in people age 55 and older; and the Alienor Study, which assessed the association between eye diseases and nutritional factors in people aged 73 and older. Patients in the Rotterdam study were examined and completed food questionnaires every 5 years over a 21-year period, while patients in the Alienor Study were seen every 2 years over a 4-year period. The researchers found that those who closely followed the diet were 41% less likely to develop late AMD compared with those who did not follow the diet.

They also found that none of the individual components of a [Mediterranean diet](#) on their own—fish, fruit, vegetables, etc—lowered the risk of AMD. Rather, it was the entire pattern of eating a [nutrient-rich diet](#) that significantly reduced the risk of late AMD.

“I believe this is a public health issue on the same scale as smoking,” said Emily Chew, MD, a clinical spokesperson for the American Academy of Ophthalmology who serves on an advisory board to the research group conducting the study. “[Chronic diseases](#) such as AMD, dementia, obesity and diabetes all have roots in poor dietary habits. It's time to take quitting a poor diet as seriously as quitting smoking.”

There are two kinds of AMD—dry and wet. The dry type affects about 80%–90% of people with AMD. In dry AMD, small white or yellowish deposits, called drusen, form on the retina, causing

it to deteriorate over time. In the wet form, blood vessels grow under the retina and leak. While there is an effective treatment available for the wet type, no treatment is available for dry AMD.

[IDEA Fit Tips, Volume 16, Issue 11](#)

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