

# Condition is primary cause of blindness

Dear Jo:  
My wife, age 71, is losing her sight. Her diagnosis is macular degeneration. Although I have learned a great deal about this condition as of late, I would appreciate it if you would address this subject in your column. Thank you.

Dear Mr. C:  
Macular degeneration is the leading cause of blindness in North America. It accounts for one-third of all cases of vision loss.

The macula is a pea-size spot on the retina, which is at the back of the eye. When light enters the eye, we are able to see because as the light enters the retina, it is turned into nerve impulses that the brain understands as an image.

The macula processes the details in the central part of the image. It needs good light to work, and it functions best in daylight.

The rest of the retina is responsible

gerontology  
**A. Jolayne Farrell**

ble for the side (peripheral) vision that is more sensitive to low light, making night vision possible.

IF THE macula deteriorates, the center of the affected person's vision becomes blurred and all detail is lost.

Although the exact cause of the deterioration is not yet understood, it has been linked to infections, high blood pressure, arteriosclerosis and general diseases like diabetes. It also appears to be associated closely with the process of aging.

In macular degeneration, as the

eye ages, the membrane separating the macula from the retinal blood vessels that nourish it, breaks down. At the same time, new abnormal blood vessels form. Blindness results when these blood vessels bleed and displace the macula. Cut off from its blood (or food) supply, the macula is permanently damaged.

The course of the condition can be rapid or slow, although it generally occurs over a period of a few years. Peripheral vision remains, but the person has difficulty seeing at a distance, or doing detailed work. Faces

are blurry and colors are hard to distinguish. **TREATMENT BEGINS** with an eye examination to try to determine the cause of the condition. Lasers are sometimes used to seal damaged blood vessels in the early stages. Unfortunately, because so little is known about the direct cause of macular degeneration, effective treatment is not possible in all cases. While macular degeneration cannot be reversed, people with this condition are usually able to contin-

ue with their daily activities by using their side vision, and by making the best use of their remaining detail vision. Mr. C, I hope you and your wife are in close contact with a low-vision clinic, as many practical suggestions and handy devices are available for people with this problem.

Readers can write to Jolayne Farrell at 11 Cynthia Crescent, Richmond Hills, Ontario L4E 1J3.

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