

# Vegetable oils linked to blindness

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Imagine no longer being able to read a book, watch TV, write a cheque or recognise people. It's difficult to comprehend, but these are the devastating effects suffered by an estimated 800,000 Australians who have macular degeneration, now the leading cause of blindness in Australia.

The macular is the central portion of the retina responsible for fine visual discrimination. MD results in the irreversible loss of central vision, which is used for tasks such as reading, writing, driving and recognising faces. Consequently it has a profound affect on independence and lifestyle.

Vision Australia estimates that two out of three people will develop the disease. Writer Colleen McCullough has been diagnosed with MD, and is the newly named patron of the MD Foundation.

The foundation calls it a modern epidemic, with incidence of the disease set to treble over the next 25 years, costing Australia billions of dollars.

MD is not only age-related, dietary and lifestyle factors also play a part.

Professor Paul Beaumont, ophthalmic surgeon and founder of the Macular Degeneration Foundation, believes the increased incidence of MD is due to the increase of vegetable oils and margarine in our diet.

"Because the pathogenesis of the disease involves lipid membrane not being able to be digested you'd have to think there's some change in the lipid content of our diet," Beaumont says.

"One of the big changes is to put a lot of vegetable oil in the foods and to make them less biodegradable. In 1957 [in the US] margarine outsold butter - what a major change that is in the food chain.

"Vegetable oils are basically the reason why this disease has become more common. All the data is consistent with it," Beaumont says.

Dr Kerry Phelps, former president of the AMA, concurs: "The epidemiological case against vegetable oils appears to be very strong."

The most recent study, reported in the *Archives of Ophthalmology*, December 2003, was conducted by Dr Johanna Seddon of Massachusetts. The prospective study, with a mean five-year follow-up, showed MD progressed 3.8 times faster in people who had a higher intake of vegetable fat.

Due to the results of this and earlier



studies, Beaumont recommends cutting out all vegetable oils, all processed oils and margarine from our diet to both reduce the risk of developing MD and to slow its progression. He suggests replacing them with the "biologically ancient" olive oil. Cold pressed, extra virgin olive oil is optimum, but olive oils in general appear safe.

In place of margarine, Beaumont recommends using butter sparingly. Even olive oil margarine is out. "It's no longer olive oil, it has been chemically modified and [is] no longer natural," he says.

Other oils, such as avocado, flaxseed and macadamia nut, have not yet been studied in relation to MD.

Because sight lost to MD cannot be regained, and with incidence of the disease increasing at an alarming rate, Beaumont believes the problem of vegetable oils must be addressed urgently.

"We are probably sitting at a time in history where we can make a greater difference to the number of people going blind than at any other time. We have to get the message out there that vegetable oils are sending us blind."

Beaumont is planning a meeting later this year, bringing together leading MD experts from around the world, doctors from the relevant medical disciplines, government representatives and manufacturers.

"It's a matter of arguing out the case and saying, 'is there enough evidence for us to demand there is a change?'"

The good news is that eating fish and nuts is protective and slows progression of the disease. "Oils that have not been denatured, such as in whole nuts, seem to be protective," Beaumont says.

It is suspected that the omega-3 content in fish provides protective

properties but it's still unclear why nuts are so beneficial. Antioxidants are also protective. As well as vitamins C and E, zinc, selenium, beta-carotene, lutein and zeaxanthin are of particular importance in relation to MD.

Beaumont recommends a diet high in brightly coloured fruits and vegetables, dark-green leafy vegetables, and at least one serving of fish and nuts a week.

However, people with the disease, or at high risk of developing it, should supplement their diet with zinc, antioxidants, vitamins and minerals, particularly lutein and selenium.

The MD Foundation recommends everyone over the age of 50 have an eye check for MD at least every two years.

MD Foundation  
Phone 1800 111 709  
www.md.foundation.com.au

## SYMPTOMS

- Dark or empty patch in centre of vision
  - Distortion of objects - straight lines appear wavy or bent
  - Difficulty reading, sewing or doing tasks that require fine vision
  - Difficulty distinguishing faces or other things in front of you
  - Blurry or fuzzy vision
  - Loss of clear, correct colours
- Check one eye at a time, as the other eye can compensate when symptoms are mild.

## THE TWO TYPES OF MD

The dry form, which is associated with the build-up of drusen (waste products), develops slowly and results in a gradual loss of central vision.

The wet form is caused by abnormal blood vessels growing in the retina. Vision loss can be sudden and severe. The dry form can develop into the wet form, so constant monitoring of the disease is important to limit its progression and minimise vision loss.

## THOSE MOST AT RISK

- Smokers
- People over the age of 50
- Women
- Fair-skinned races
- People with light eye colours, such as blue
- People with a family history of MD
- People with high blood pressure or cardio-vascular problems

## REDUCING THE RISK

- Stop smoking
- Eliminate vegetable oils and margarine - replace with olive oil and butter, used sparingly
- Increase intake of fish and nuts
- Eat lots of brightly coloured fruit and vegetables, including dark-green leafy vegetables
- Supplement diet with zinc and antioxidants (in consultation with doctor)
- Exercise regularly and control weight and blood pressure
- Protect eyes from ultra-violet light