

Macular degeneration

Loss of central vision affects millions of seniors

By Diana Washington Valdez / El Paso Times

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Dr. Stephen Schuster, a third-generation El Paso ophthalmologist, examines Robert Barron during a Lasik follow-up appointment. (Mark Lambie / El Paso Times)

Lola Dawkins, a retired business professor, was a world traveler and active senior citizen when she began to develop problems with her vision.

"I noticed it after I bought a brand-new Oldsmobile in 1995," she said.

Eventually, she needed a magnifier and more light to see. Age-related macular degeneration had set in.

Thanks to new equipment and training, Dawkins, 94, continues to lead an active life and is on the

board of the El Paso Lighthouse for the Blind.

"With the equipment, I can do e-mail, word processing and play games like Scrabble," she said. "I first learned how to use a computer after I became visually impaired."

Macular degeneration robs people of their central vision, which is required to make out fine details. Most people with age-related macular degeneration don't lose peripheral vision.

Distorted vision includes seeing straight lines that appear bent, seeing gray spots similar to the effects of a flashbulb and seeing a different size for the same shape from one eye.

About 10 million Americans have from age-related macular degeneration, which is the leading cause of vision loss in people 65 or older in the United States, according to EyeCare America, a nonprofit service arm of the Foundation of the American Academy of Ophthalmology.

Throughout the month, EyeAmerica has conducted a publicity campaign to raise awareness of the condition and encourage seniors with eye problems to get tested.

"There is no cure for age-related macular degeneration, but early detection and treatment may lessen severe vision loss and slow the progression of the disease," said Dr. William Tasman, chairman of EyeCare America's AMD EyeCare Program.

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Tasman said the disease means the central area of the retina, known as the macula, is losing function.

Someone with macular degeneration might be able to see a clock, but not read the numbers, or when talking to you, not recognize your features.

Dr. Stephen Schuster, an ophthalmologist in El Paso, said age-related macular degeneration is more common than people imagine.

"I see about four patients a day with macular degeneration," Schuster said. "Aging, cholesterol, hardening of arteries and genetics are contributing factors.

"Many people usually are not aware they have this. They often complain about having small blind spots. Some people can develop it when they are in their 40s or 50s."

In the early stages of the disease, eye specialists monitor the progression of the disease. Patients who have high blood pressure are treated for this, and smokers are advised to quit tobacco.

Schuster said there are two types of macular degeneration -- dry and wet.

About 80 percent of people have the dry type, which is less serious than the wet type (when blood vessels leak fluid or blood beneath the retina).

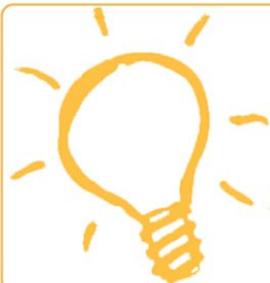
Vitamins to maintain eye health, which are rich in anti-oxidants, can help delay the progression.



Dr. Stephen Schuster has a follow-up visit with Lasik patient Linda Stanton. Schuster, who also treats age-related macular degeneration, says he sees four patients a day with this condition. (Mark Lambie / El Paso Times)

"The most important thing is to get your eye exams," Schuster said.

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Marianne Fleager, developmental director of the El Paso Lighthouse for the Blind, said El Paso has resources to help visually impaired people.

The organization can also help people locate special equipment -- such as scanners that copy print which a computer can read out loud to a user -- and closed-circuit TV systems.

"We provide job training for visually impaired people, and we have a support group that meets each month," she said.

Dawkins was able to learn about the kinds of eye evaluations and devices available to the visually impaired through contacts at the Lighthouse for the Blind.

"You have to appreciate what you have left, and I have plenty left," she said. "I still help at my church, and I am still certified to volunteer at hospice."

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About macular degeneration

It is the major cause of vision loss in people 50 and older.

Some patients receive injections in the eye to block harmful blood vessels.

High blood pressure, hardening of the arteries, age, smoking and genetics are factors.

Vitamins for the eyes that contain anti-oxidants may help slow the progression.

Most people notice it when they start to lose central

vision, which is needed to see fine details.

The El Paso Lighthouse for the Blind can help. A support group meets the fourth Tuesday each month at 200 Washington St.; www.lighthouse-elpaso.com; 532-4495.

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