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Aussies blind to growing threat of eye disease

Too many Australians have their eyes closed to the leading cause of blindness among our working-age population, a new study has revealed.

A YouGov poll commissioned by Macular Disease Foundation Australia (MDFA) discovered that only 29% of Aussies aged 50 to 70 have heard of diabetic retinopathy (DR), while only 26% are aware of diabetic macular oedema (DMO), a complication of DR that threatens the central vision.

Although 82% identified the eyes as a body part that diabetes can affect – higher than feet (74%), kidneys (68%), and even the heart (53%) – the lack of awareness of what these conditions are called means many people who are at risk remain in the dark about these sight-threatening complications.

MDFA commissioned this study to mark Macula Month, an annual awareness campaign urging at-risk Aussies to check their macula. Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) and diabetic eye disease (DED) are the most common conditions that threaten the macula and detailed central vision.

Diabetic retinopathy is the most common diabetic eye disease and the top cause of blindness in working-age Aussies, affecting between 300,000 and 400,000 people.

But MDFA CEO Dee Hopkins is concerned that most people can't even name it.

"Diabetic retinopathy claims the eyesight of more working-age Australians than any other eye condition, yet less than 30% of people know its name," Ms Hopkins says.

"But we do know that early action can save sight. It's crucial that everyone over 50 – and everyone diagnosed with diabetes – has regular eye checks with their eye health professional to detect any changes to the eye early."

Around 1.7 million Australians live with diabetes – a figure expected to climb past two million by 2025, driving a surge in diabetic eye disease.

Everyone with diabetes is at risk of developing diabetic retinopathy, and the longer a person has diabetes, the greater the likelihood of the disease.

Almost everyone with type 1 diabetes and more than 60% of people with type 2 diabetes will develop some form of DR within 20 years of diagnosis. One in three people over the age of 50 with diabetes has diabetic retinopathy.¹

But MDFA Ambassador and 2020 Australian of the Year, Adelaide ophthalmologist Dr James Muecke AM, explains that people with diabetes can take steps to reverse their risk of vision loss.

"Diabetic retinopathy is the only reversible macular condition," Dr Muecke says.

"If you control your diabetes, or if you are able to put your type 2 diabetes into remission, you can turn this blinding disease around. We want people to not only understand the name of the disease, we want everyone to take action to avoid its devastating outcome.

"This is easily done through regular eye examinations and managing your diabetes. When the disease is picked up early, you can make lifestyle changes and access good treatments that maintain sight and prevent severe vision loss."

National Helpline: 1800 111 709 www.mdffoundation.com.au; www.CheckMyMacula.com.au

The good news is that more than two thirds of people polled are having regular eye checks.

The YouGov study showed that 68% of respondents have had an eye examination and/or macula check in the last two years – more than other health checks such as cholesterol (66%), bowel cancer screenings (51%), glucose/diabetes (44%) and skin checks (36%).

This month, MDFA’s annual Macula Month awareness campaign will urge even more Australians to book an eye exam through the Check My Macula tool (www.CheckMyMacula.com.au).

Check My Macula is a short online quiz that reveals your individual risk factors for macular disease – including diabetic eye disease – in less than a minute, then helps you make an appointment with your nearest optometrist, or schedule a reminder to have an eye exam in the future.

“Tens of thousands of Australians have already taken the Check My Macula quiz, and many more will join them this Macula Month,” Ms Hopkins says.

“One minute. Five questions and you’re done. You can learn about your risk of age-related macular degeneration (AMD) and diabetic eye disease whether you’re on a phone or computer, sitting on the bus or waiting in a queue.”

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About Macular Disease Foundation Australia (MDFA)

MDFA is the peak national body representing the voice of the macular disease community, and is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. We are committed to reducing the incidence and impact of macular disease, the leading cause of blindness and severe vision loss in Australia. We provide a range of information and support services via our National Helpline 1800 111 709 and website at www.mdfoundation.com.au.

About macular disease

Macular disease covers a range of painless conditions that affect the central retina (the macula) at the back of the eye. The most common are age-related macular degeneration (AMD) and diabetic retinopathy (DR), including diabetic macular oedema (DMO). AMD accounts for 50% of blindness in Australia. One in seven (approximately 1.4 million) Australians over the age of 50 have some evidence of AMD. DR affects between 300,000 and 400,000 Australians – the leading cause of preventable blindness among the working-age population.

About Check My Macula

www.CheckMyMacula.com.au is an initiative of MDFA. The online quiz has been developed as an educational tool and is based on known risk factors. Other risk factors, not included, may influence development of macular disease. This tool does not replace an eye exam or advice provided by a qualified eye health professional – an optometrist or ophthalmologist.

About the YouGov study

This study was conducted online between 18-22 February 2021 by YouGov. The sample was made up of 1,049 Australians aged between 50 and 70. The data was weighted by age, gender and region to reflect the latest ABS population estimates.

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Reference

1. Baker IDI and Centre for Eye Research Australia (2013). *Out of sight – A report into diabetic eye disease in Australia*.

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