

Macular degeneration and driving

October 2020

Some medical and eyesight conditions may affect the ability to drive safely. VicRoads Medical Review aims to support drivers to drive at any age so long as they are medically fit to do so.

Good eyesight is essential for driving in order to see and respond to the road and adjacent environment, including other vehicles, signs, signals, pedestrians and hazards.

Good vision is particularly important to safely complete manoeuvres such as lane changing, merging and negotiating intersections.

This fact sheet provides information about macular degeneration and driving, including:

- How this condition may impact safe driving
- How to care for your vision to help you continue driving for as long as possible,
- How the VicRoads Medical Review process supports you in managing your condition in relation to driving
- Where to get more information.

Early action improves sight and safety

Macular degeneration, also known as age related macular degeneration (AMD), is a group of eye diseases affecting the central part of the retina (called the macula).

They cause progressive loss of central vision, which results in the inability to clearly see objects directly in front of you.

The following images provided by the Vision 2020 Initiative are indicative of possible visual changes with AMD compared with normal vision.



Full healthy vision



Age-related macular degeneration (indicative only)

AMD is the leading cause of blindness in Australia. Regular eye checks are essential, particularly as you get older. This enables early detection and treatment of AMD or other eye conditions and will optimise your ability to drive for as long as possible.

General eye checks are recommended every 2 years; yearly for people over 65. From the age of 50, these checks should include a test of your macula. If you have AMD you may need to be seen more frequently as advised by your eye health professional or doctor.

If you notice any sudden changes in vision between your regular checks, you should see your eye health professional as soon as possible.

How does AMD affect driving?

You may not notice changes to your vision in the early stages of AMD, but as the disease progresses symptoms may include:

- difficulty reading,
- distortion, where straight lines appear wavy or bent,
- difficulty distinguishing faces,
- dark or blurred patches in your central vision (as depicted in images), and
- difficulty seeing objects and details especially in low light and at night.

These changes can affect your ability to drive safely, including how well you see pedestrians, signs and traffic lights and responding in a timely manner to changing traffic environments. The extent and position of macular damage determines impacts on driving.

All Victorian drivers are required by law to notify VicRoads if they have a long-term, chronic health condition or disability that could affect their ability to drive safely. This includes conditions affecting vision such as macular degeneration.

What do you need to do if you are diagnosed with AMD?

It is important to speak to your doctor or eye health professional early on so that you understand your condition and the potential impacts. You might ask about:

- How your condition currently impacts on driving
- What might be long-term impacts on driving
- How often eyes and vision should be checked

- Whether transitioning to not driving in the future will be required
- Where you can get more information
- Notifying VicRoads about your AMD diagnosis.

Notifying VicRoads Medical Review is simple. Ask your eye health professional to complete and submit a VicRoads eyesight form. Keep a record of this.

Alternatively, you can notify VicRoads by phone, email, fax or mail using the contact details below.

What happens at Medical Review?

When you notify Medical Review about your AMD diagnosis, you will be asked to provide a report from your eye health professional. A medical report from your treating doctor may also be required.

The Medical Review team will review the report/s and make a decision about your driving based on the national medical standards ([Assessing Fitness to Drive, Austroads 2016](#)), which include the vision and eye disorder standards for driving.

Most people who report to VicRoads early in their condition continue to drive, but with requirements which aim to maintain road safety, such as regular eyesight reviews.

What is a conditional licence?

Conditional licences permit driving under circumstances that suit the capacity of the driver. For example, with early macular disease, you may be able to continue to drive with restrictions such as:

- Wearing corrective lenses
- Driving only in daylight hours
- Driving only in local familiar areas
- Having regular vision reviews with your eye health professional to check that your vision continues to meet the required standards.

This approach helps you to continue to drive for as long as you are safe to do so. It also helps you to plan for when you may no longer be safe to drive.

VicRoads will contact you to advise you of the Medical Review outcome, next steps or to request further information.

Drivers of commercial vehicles

Due to the nature of their work, drivers of commercial vehicles such as trucks, taxis, hire cars and buses are required to meet stricter visual standards than private vehicle drivers.

Sometimes a driver with AMD may not be able to drive a commercial vehicle, while still being able to drive a private car. Your eye health professional and VicRoads Medical Review team will provide case by case advice in such circumstances.

More about AMD

What types of AMD are there?

AMD is classified as early, intermediate and late stage disease. Early and intermediate AMD are caused by the build-up of waste material (drusen) under the macula, and typically have little or no impact on vision.

Late AMD includes dry (atrophic) AMD and wet (neovascular) AMD. In dry AMD there is a gradual loss of retinal cells leading to patches of missing retina and loss of central vision. Wet AMD occurs when abnormal blood vessels grow underneath the retina. These new vessels are fragile and can leak fluid and blood, damaging the macula. It often leads to a rapid loss of central vision.

To assess the back of the eye (the macula) your eyes may be dilated with drops and examined by your eye health professional using specialised equipment

Are you at risk of AMD?

Several factors place you at increased risk of AMD:

- **Age:** One in seven Australians over the age of 50 have some evidence of AMD.
- **Family history:** Having a parent, sibling or child with AMD.
- **Smoking:** Smokers are more likely to develop AMD and often earlier than non-smokers. The risk of AMD reduces when you stop smoking.
- **Poor nutrition:** A diet rich in fruit, vegetables and omega-3 fats reduces the risk of developing AMD.

To find out more about your potential risk, take the **Check My Macula** quiz at www.CheckMyMacula.com.au

If you want to check your vision, the Amsler grid is a simple test you can do at home. It is available from the Macular Disease Foundation Australia (see below). This is not a diagnostic tool nor a substitute for regular eye checks. If you notice changes in your vision you should contact your eye health professional.

Treatment options

Currently there is no cure for AMD, and no treatment for early, intermediate or late stage dry (atrophic) AMD. However, there are effective treatments for wet (neovascular) AMD. These aim to stabilise the disease and maintain best vision for as long as possible.

Diet and lifestyle are important to maintain healthy eyes, including reducing the risk of AMD and delaying its progression.

Regular monitoring by your eye health professional will support your safety when driving, and may enable you to continue driving for longer. It will also help your planning for alternative mobility options when driving is no longer possible. Support from family and friends is also very important.

Where can you get further information?

Macular Disease Foundation Australia

Provides free information, resources (including free Amsler grids), education and support.

Website: www.mdfoundation.com.au
MDFA National Helpline: 1800 111 709
Email: info@mdfoundation.com.au

VicRoads Medical Review

Website: vicroads.vic.gov.au
Email: medicalreview@roads.vic.gov.au
Phone: (03) 8391 3226 or VicRoads on 13 11 71 (TTY 13 36 77, Speak and Listen 1300 555 727).
Fax: (03) 9854 2307
Mail: Medical Review, PO Box 2504, Kew VIC

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