

Eat Well. Feel Well. See Well.

By Erica Camhi, Davis Vision Staff Writer



“Eat your fruits and veggies!”

Most of us have heard this declaration from Mom even before we could feed ourselves. Our doctors and teachers all echoed the same sentiment. Through the past two decades, an abundance of research has proven Mom right, confirming a strong link between eating right and disease prevention.

While Mom did, in fact, know best, she may not have told us that besides helping to thwart myriad diseases, like cancer, eating right can also help to preserve our sight. That's welcome news: A recent survey revealed that nearly as many baby boomers worry about vision loss as about heart disease or cancer. Their fear of losing their eyesight is well founded, too. More than 25 million Americans are affected by the sight stealers age-related macular degeneration (AMD) and cataracts. While cataracts can be fixed surgically, there is no definitive cure for AMD.

So, what can you do to ward off eye disease and keep your sight strong? The “Don'ts” list includes the usual suspects: avoid large amounts of sodium, saturated fats, fried and/or sugary foods and soft drinks. Another major “Don't” is smoking. Smoking encourages free radicals, which are the instigators of disease (including eye disease) formation in the body. In fact, smokers are three times more likely to suffer from AMD than non-smokers.

No one can completely avoid the free radicals that pervade the atmosphere. That's why the “Do” list includes lots of fruits and veggies: They contain the antioxidants that can help our bodies defend themselves from free radicals.

You may want to consider a regimen of antioxidants, especially if you are over 50, if you have a family history of (or if you show early signs of) eye disease. Other risk factors include diabetes, excessive sunlight exposure, high blood pressure, obesity and having a lighter eye color.

The good news...

Vitamins/antioxidants such as carotenoids (lutein and zeaxanthin), vitamin C, vitamin E, zinc and beta-carotene have proven promising in eye disease prevention. Below is a list of the foods in which these nutrients can be found.

Avoid saturated fats, large amounts of sugar and sodium.

AREDS Formula: Beta-carotene (15 mg), vitamins C (500mg), E (400 IU) and zinc (80mg) compose the AREDS formula supplement. This supplement was tested during the Age-Related Eye Disease Study (AREDS), an ongoing major clinical trial sponsored by the National Eye Institute. It was found to reduce the risk of advanced AMD progression by about 25% while reducing vision loss by 19%.

Found in: Many health food stores carry the AREDS supplement.

Lutein and Zeaxanthin: Consumption of these two carotenoids has been associated with a decreased AMD risk and a decreased risk of cataracts when combined with vitamin E.

Found in: Highest concentrations are in dark, leafy green vegetables such as spinach, collard greens, turnip greens and kale.

Vitamin E: Tied to reduced progression of AMD and cataracts.

Found in: Fortified cereals, sweet potatoes, vegetable oils, nuts and seeds.

Vitamin C: Associated with decreased risk of AMD and cataracts; may also play a role in preventing or alleviating glaucoma.

Found in: Oranges, grapefruit, tomatoes and orange juice.

Omega-3 Fatty Acids: May help prevent AMD, cataracts and dry eyes.

Found in: Cold-water fish such as salmon, mackerel and herring; flaxseed oil and fish oil; ground flaxseeds and walnuts.

Zinc: Linked to reduced risk of advanced AMD as well as night blindness when paired with vitamin A.

Found in: Oysters; beef, Dungeness crab, turkey (dark meat).

Beta-carotene: May protect against night blindness and dry eyes.

Found in: Carrots, sweet potatoes, spinach, kale, butternut squash.

In most studies, the amount of nutrients needed to produce significant benefits was much higher than what most Americans receive from their food. If you are at high risk, ask your doctor if beginning a vitamin supplement regimen is right for you. These supplements are not meant to take the place of more conventional eye disease treatments.

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, American Optometric Association, All About Vision, Ocular Nutrition Society



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