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Cataracts, Macular Degeneration and Nutrition

by Raymond Francis

Most of us take our ability to see for granted. We assume our eyes will function for a lifetime, but there is no guarantee this will happen. Consider that one out of four people over age 65 have lost part of their vision due to macular degeneration, and most people over age 75 have at least some impaired vision due to cataracts. Maintaining good vision as you grow older is not something you can take for granted—unless you give yourself the proper nutrients.

Poor vision and eye diseases are epidemic in America today. There are many reasons for this, but nutrition plays a critical role. The eye is a complex and delicate organ. One factor that makes the eye vulnerable to damage is that light enters the eye. This allows us to see, but it also presents problems. Light fades the paint on your house or car, or the color on your drapes, furniture or carpets. Light degrades plastics, causes dietary oils to turn rancid and our skin to burn. Think for a moment about how much damage light can do if it gets inside your eye. Due to this potential for harm, the eye has a number of defensive mechanisms to protect itself. It is important to understand how to support these defenses—otherwise damage will occur.

The eye is very rich in lipids (fats), and the lens of the eye is very susceptible to what we chemists call light-induced lipid peroxidation. When light enters the eye, free radicals are generated, damaging the eye's fatty molecules and impairing vision unless something is done to prevent it. Antioxidants quench free radicals. In short, light will damage your eyes unless they are properly protected by antioxidants.

Oxidative damage by free radicals causes cataracts and macular degeneration, the two major types of visual impairment in the elderly. Neither of these should happen. There are things we can do to protect ourselves through diet and supplementation. Let's look at some possibilities:

Cataracts

Cataract surgery is now the largest single item in the Medicare expenditure budget. Cataracts are cloudiness in the lens of the eye, usually caused by free radical damage, resulting in blurred vision. Age is considered to be a major risk factor for cataracts, and about 80 percent of people over age 75 have some degree of cataract damage. That sounds bad, but remember there are 20 percent who do not have this damage. The question is: what do you have to do to join that group? Here are some insights: Results of animal studies have shown that vitamin E, a fat-soluble antioxidant, is able to arrest and even reverse cataract development. A number of epidemiological studies have found a connection between lower-thanoptimal levels of vitamin E and the incidence of cataracts. A 1999 study in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition looked at people between the ages of 50 and 86 years of age and found that those with the highest levels of vitamin E in their blood had the lowest rate of cataracts. People with vitamin E levels in the highest third had a 60 percent decrease in cataract risk.

There is actually a compelling body of evidence pointing to the health benefits from taking vitamin E in higher than RDA doses. Vitamin E is known to be useful for slowing the aging process, enhancing immunity, and in decreasing the risk of heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and Alzheimer's. Modern living places an ever-increasing demand for antioxidant chemicals on all of us. In addition, as we age, our bodies experience age-related increases in free radicals—at the same time there is a decreased ability to utilize antioxidants like vitamin E.

The vitamin C concentration in the lens is one of the highest of any human tissue. Obviously, Mother Nature put it there for a reason, so it should not be a surprise that people with the highest amounts of vitamin C in their body experience the fewest cataracts. Analysis of the famous Nurses' Health Study found that longterm vitamin C supplementation had a substantial effect on the incidence of cataracts. In

fact, they were reduced by a whopping 83 percent. Another study in the International Journal of Vitamin Nutrition Research looked at people with cataracts in grades of severity. The researchers found that people with the lowest vitamin C concentrations had the highest cataract severity. The authors concluded that, "Vitamin C content appears to be a good indicator of cataract severity." When you consider that even those with the highest amounts of vitamin C in the Nurse's Study were most likely still below optimal levels, the potential for good with proper supplementation is very significant.

Macular Degeneration

Macular degeneration is the leading cause of visual impairment and blindness in people over age 55, dramatically increasing in frequency after age 60. It is a deterioration of the central and most vital part of the retina. Like cataracts, macular degeneration also results from cumulative free-radical oxidative damage. Conventional medicine has little to offer, but researchers have been documenting benefits from alternative approaches. Consistent correlations between macular degeneration and low levels of dietary antioxidants have been found. A 1995 study in the Archives of Ophthalmology found that low levels of the carotenoid lycopene were associated with increased risk of macular degeneration. Lycopene has a strong ability to quench oxygen free radicals (rich sources of lycopene include red grapefruit and tomatoes). A 2006 study in the Archives of Ophthalmology found that people who consumed the most omega-3 oils were 75 percent less likely to develop macular degeneration. Another study in the American Journal of Epidemiology found that those who ate the most fresh fruits and vegetables had the least macular degeneration. Yet another study found that over 90 percent of the macular degeneration patients who were treated with vitamin E experienced vision improvement.

Nutrition

Failing vision is one of the hallmarks of advancing age, but only if you are nutritionally deficient. To prevent and treat both cataracts and macular degeneration, eat a diet filled with fresh, organic fruits and vegetables. Beyond that, supplementation with high quality nutrients is essential. Specifically, vitamins A, C and E plus a superior multivitamin like Beyond Health Multi Vit/Min is essential. Quercetin, CoQ10, carotenes, essential fatty acids, glutathione, lipoic acid and zinc are also recommended. The problem with any supplement is to find one that is both safe and effective. The supplement industry is a virtual zoo with thousands of products and only a few percent that are worth what you pay for them. For example, almost half of all multivitamins do not dissolve soon enough to be of any use to the body. Most vitamin E products do not function well as antioxidants; they provide little protection from free radicals and may even generate them. Similarly, most CoQ10 products are junk, and many essential fatty acids are already rancid before you buy them. Beyond Health extensively researches all of these products. We make it our job to find the very best world-class products and to make them available to the public all in one place. For those with eye problems, a superior supplement program would include Beyond Health's Comprehensive and Eye Support Kits. Beyond Health can be reached at: 800-250-3063.

Raymond Francis is an MIT-trained scientist, a registered nutrition consultant, author of Never Be Sick Again and Never Be Fat Again, host of the Beyond Health Show, chairman of The Project to End Disease and an internationally recognized leader in optimal health maintenance.

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