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## **Survey reveals that 50 year old Australians are at risk of vision loss and blindness**

Australians in their 50s are putting themselves at risk of going blind with a new survey revealing only one in 10 are able to properly identify the major risk factors for age-related macular degeneration (AMD), Macular Disease Foundation Australia (MDFA) has warned.

One in seven Australians over 50 has the early signs of AMD – Australia’s leading cause of blindness – but may not know it until it’s too late.

MDFA CEO Dee Hopkins said the new survey showed that more than 80 per cent of people in their 50s know they should have an eye exam every two years.

“But even though they know this, almost 40 per cent gamble with their sight by skipping out on these exams,” Ms Hopkins said.

Ms Hopkins was speaking at the launch of Check My Macula™ ([www.CheckMyMacula.com.au](http://www.CheckMyMacula.com.au)), an online initiative of Macular Disease Foundation Australia, to help Australia’s over-50s quickly and easily identify their risk factors for macular disease.

“Check My Macula is an online quiz that aims to remind Australians to add an eye exam, including a check of the macula, to the ‘shopping list’ of other health tests we’re told to tick off when we turn 50,” Ms Hopkins explained.

“Check My Macula makes personalised risk information about Australia’s leading causes of vision loss quick and easy to access.

“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.”

Ms Hopkins said the initiative was developed because Australians consistently rate their eyesight as their most precious sense, yet don’t prioritise essential eye checks.

“People in their 50s are part of the ‘sandwich’ generation. They’re often juggling the needs of kids and elderly parents. It’s also the age when a lot of other health tests are required. Unfortunately, eye exams often get pushed to last on the list when people are time poor,” Ms Hopkins said.

“Fifty-year-olds don’t feel old, and while they’re aware of age-related macular degeneration, they associate the disease with the elderly. They don’t realise that turning 50 is a key risk factor.

“Check My Macula gives these people the information they need quickly. In less than one minute, they can find out their risk factors. They can then go on to find a nearby optometrist and book an appointment straight away.”

A YouGov Galaxy Poll, conducted for MDFA, found that while there was a high awareness of AMD among people in their 50s, only 10 per cent could correctly identify the main risk factors: age, family history, smoking and lack of regular eye exams.

The survey of 50 to 59-year-olds found most (67 per cent) were aware age was a risk factor for AMD. However:

- less than half (45 per cent) were aware of the strong hereditary risk of AMD. In fact, 12 per cent thought there was no familial risk.

- more than a third of people in this 'at risk' age group either haven't had an eye exam in the past two years or couldn't recall when they last had one.
- Only seven per cent of Australians correctly identified smoking as a risk factor for AMD.

Smokers are three to four times more at risk of developing AMD than non-smokers, and the onset of the disease occurs five to 10 years earlier.

"Smoking is the single largest modifiable risk factor for age-related macular degeneration," said Retinal Specialist and MDFA Medical Committee Chair Associate Professor Alex Hunyor.

"And if you do have AMD, smoking can compromise treatment for wet (neovascular) AMD – one of the most aggressive, sight-threatening forms of macular disease.

"What's concerning is that the survey showed people who smoked in the past decade were half as likely to have had macular checks in the past two years (36 per cent, compared with 64 per cent of non-smokers)."

Macular Disease Foundation Australia's launch of the Check My Macula initiative is being supported by a quirky television campaign, voiced by Shane Jacobson and MDFA Ambassador Jean Kittson. Both Jean and Shane are actors, writers and comedians.

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#### **ABOUT MACULAR DISEASE FOUNDATION AUSTRALIA (MDFA)**

MDFA is the peak national body representing the voice of the macular disease community. It is committed to reducing the incidence and impact of macular disease, the leading cause of blindness and severe vision loss in Australia. It provides a range of information and support services via its **National Helpline 1800 111 709** and online webinar series, available at [www.mdfoundation.com.au](http://www.mdfoundation.com.au).

The Check My Macula™ quiz, an initiative of Macular Disease Foundation Australia, is available at [www.CheckMyMacula.com.au](http://www.CheckMyMacula.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 edema (DME). AMD accounts for 50 per cent of blindness in Australia. One in seven (approximately 1.29 million) Australians over the age of 50 have some evidence of AMD.

#### **ABOUT CHECK MY MACULA™**

[www.CheckMyMacula.com.au](http://www.CheckMyMacula.com.au) is an initiative of Macular Disease Foundation Australia. The online quiz has been developed by MDFA 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 YOUNGOV/GALAXY POLL**

This study was conducted online between 25-28 February 2020 by YouGov Galaxy. It comprised a nationally representative sample of 623 Australians aged 50-59 years. The data was weighted by age, gender and region to reflect the latest ABS population estimates.

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