



Eccentric Viewing Techniques

Macular degeneration can lead to the loss of central vision in both eyes. However, as it does not affect more peripheral parts of the retina, the peripheral visual field remains healthy. This is the reason why people, whose only eye problem is macular degeneration, never go completely blind.

Many people with macular disease use a technique known as eccentric viewing, where instead of looking “straight at” something, an area of peripheral retina is used to look at objects.

Often, people who successfully use eccentric viewing aim their eyes slightly above the object they are looking at – for example, to see a friend’s face, they may aim their eyes at their friend’s forehead whilst paying attention to their face. Because of the blind spot caused by the macular degeneration, their friend’s forehead may not be clear, but the central features of the face will be clearer.

Other people move their eyes to one side: aiming

the eyes towards their friend's left or right ear, for example.

This technique takes a lot of time to get used to: after all, until the development of macular disease your entire life is spent using the central part of the visual field to look at things, and teaching your brain to use an alternative part of the visual field is difficult.

However, recent research has shown that the majority of patients with macular disease do learn to use a peripheral retinal area to look at things with – often without being consciously aware of it!

Some patients find that practice helps them to use eccentric viewing more successfully. One method is to use a clock. Whilst looking straight at each of the numbers in turn, notice how clear the hands of the

clock are. Remember that the number you are looking at may disappear or become difficult to see, as you are using the very central part of your retina. When you have decided which number to look towards to give you the best view of the clock hands, practice looking away from the clock and then back to your chosen number. With time you may find that you automatically start to look above, or to one side of something you want to see.

Another approach which some patients have found useful is to use a small target, like the red light on a television which shows the power is on. By moving your eyes around slightly, you can see where you need to position your eyes so that the light is clearest.

Again, by looking away from the light and then back

towards it, some people learn to use eccentric viewing more effectively.

It is important to realise that these exercises may not help everybody, but some patients do find them useful. They will certainly not make your macular degeneration any worse: reading, watching television and so on will not damage your eyesight. It is perhaps worth explaining to your friends that you may not be using your central vision to see with; that way, they do not think that you are being dishonest when you do not look them straight in the eye!

Eccentric viewing will never make your vision as good as it was before the onset of macular degeneration: the arrangement of cells on the retina is such that the vision with peripheral retina can never be as sharp as

central vision. What it can do is to maximise the residual vision in your eyes.

For more information about eccentric viewing techniques, ask at your low vision clinic appointment.



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