
Living with Macular Degeneration

By

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The day I was dreading finally came when I had to turn in my driver's license. This was not a surprise, since my vision had been slowly deteriorating for several years and I knew what the inevitable outcome would be. So at the age of 80, after 63 years of accident-free driving, I was no longer the owner of an automobile.

What I'm dealing with is age-related macular degeneration, a condition of the eye that gradually destroys a person's central vision, which is needed to see clearly and manage daily tasks such as driving and reading. With my visual impairment I am now considered legally blind.

Having impaired vision has forced me to make some major changes in my life. It has not been easy. Being limited in my ability to read has been frustrating. Losing the freedom to drive has been equally trying. A hard decision I had to make was to terminate a happy association with the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, where I had been a volunteer and docent in my retirement. Visual impairment has also put constraints on my favorite hobby, photography. However, I remind myself that my condition is not life-threatening and that otherwise I am in good health.

I am not alone. According to the National Institutes of Health, about 1.75 million Americans over age 40 suffer from advanced macular degeneration. Another 7 million Americans have symptoms of macular degeneration, and are at risk of vision loss.

There are two types of macular degeneration, wet and dry. About 85 percent of afflicted people have the dry kind, according to the National Institutes of Health's National Eye Institute. I suffer from the wet kind. Wet macular degeneration occurs when abnormal blood vessels behind the retina start to grow under the macula (located in the center of the retina) and leads to bleeding or leaking, which causes vision to get blurred or distorted, according to the National Eye Institute. In very advanced stages, vision loss can be severe due to scarring.

Though I didn't realize it at the time, the first sign of the problem occurred in the spring of 1999 while I was serving in the Peace Corps teaching English in a high school in Poland following my retirement. I noticed that while taking photographs I was having difficulty seeing through my camera's viewfinder with my right eye. I thought little about it and didn't consult a physician until I returned home that summer.

I could see the problem developing every time I went in for an eye examination and found that I could read fewer and fewer lines on the eye chart. In spite of new glasses I began to need a magnifying glass for reading. I now have a video magnifier, a large device that sits on my desk,

which enables me to read anything, even the telephone book. Audio books have also been a godsend.

Actually, I can see everything around me, but what I see is blurry. Though I don't have difficulty getting around, I have to be careful crossing the street with a signal. If I look directly at the light, I don't see the color. Instead, I use my peripheral vision (which isn't affected) to see if the light says it is safe to cross. It is similar when watching television. Unless I am sitting very close, I don't see colors unless I look to one side. I must say, it's a bit weird. However, I have found that taking small binoculars to performances at the University of Massachusetts Fine Arts Center enables me to see everything clearly, even the colors.

If I am out in public, like at the grocery store, I have to remember not to look at anyone directly unless the person speaks to me because from a distance I don't recognize people I know. I don't want them to think I'm being unfriendly if I don't wave from the other end of the aisle.

There is no cure for macular degeneration, but there are treatments that can arrest its progression. One is laser surgery. This procedure uses a laser to destroy the fragile, leaky blood vessels. In my case, injections are used. To slow down the leaking, a small amount of a drug is injected into the vitreous, the fluid inside the eye. The notion of having a needle stuck into the eyeball sounds worse than it is. I have had numerous injections over several years. With the application of a topical anesthetic I felt only a tiny pinprick. At least for now, my condition has stabilized.

I have a certificate from the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind that verifies my blind status. As a result, I am entitled to a variety of services that the commission provides, such as audio reading aids and computer software that makes text larger. The staff has been very helpful.

I am also making use of the PVTA van service for my medical appointments. By calling several days in advance I make a reservation to be picked up. Tickets are \$2.50 each way, but by purchasing them at the Senior Center, the cost is only \$2.

So is there a silver lining to any of this? Yes, I can list a few things. One is that I am walking more. I live a mile from downtown Amherst and it takes no more than 25 minutes on foot to get there. It is also only a mile from my house to a UMass library, where I meet my tutor in Spanish once a week. By walking I am getting more exercise and noticing things around town I never saw before. No doubt it is going to be a challenge when winter sets in.

Another positive side to this is that with no car to drive I'm saving money by not having to buy gas and pay for repairs and insurance. But even more important, I am not adding to air pollution. I like to think of it as a contribution, however modest, to the slowing of global warming.

As I negotiate the world around me, I have come to appreciate even more the kindness of friends and even strangers. And with every passing day I am ever more grateful for the outstanding health care network that is available when needed.

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