

## **Age-related, Macular Degeneration or AMD**

### **A Worldwide Growing Concern**

Macular Degeneration is a prevalent vision condition among individuals over 65 in the United States and developing countries worldwide. The statistics are concerning, with the numbers increasing significantly among older age groups. For individuals aged 75 and above, the incidence of macular degeneration can be as high as one in five, and for those over 85, the prevalence jumps to one in four.

Recent studies have indicated that the prevalence of early Macular Degeneration is higher than previously believed, reflecting a growing concern for public health. Estimated that approximately 200 million people globally are affected by some form of macular degeneration. Moreover, projections indicate that by 2040, this number could escalate to as high as 280 million individuals.

These statistics highlight the importance of raising awareness about macular degeneration, encouraging early detection and intervention, and advocating for increased research and resources to support individuals affected by this vision-threatening condition.

#### **Early Stage - Macular Degeneration, What You Should Know**

In the initial stages of macular degeneration, symptoms may manifest in one eye, leading patients to notice missing letters in words, waviness or distortion in vision, and printed material appearing gray instead of black.

Changes can occur in one eye without affecting the other in the initial phases of macular degeneration. Therefore, it is advisable to periodically cover one eye at a time to monitor your vision and detect any early changes that may be present without your awareness.

When experiencing these symptoms, it is essential to undergo a dilated eye examination with an ophthalmologist. During this examination, early indicators such as small yellow deposits at the outer edges of the retina, known as drusen, may be detected. It is advisable to inquire about drusen's presence during your eye exam.

Although drusen may not directly result in vision loss, it signals that the retina cells may not be metabolizing correctly. Subsequent visits should involve monitoring for any increase in drusen quantity or size compared to previous exams, as such changes could indicate a progression of the early stage of macular degeneration. It is worth noting that macular degeneration can progress slowly, and subtle changes may occur over time and are not easily detected by the person affected.

## **Recognizing Early Symptoms: Techniques for Light-To-Dark Adjustment**

One common adjustment to be aware of is dark adaptation, which refers to the difficulty of transitioning from a bright environment or sunlight to a dimmer setting, such as stepping indoors. One way to alleviate this discomfort is to pause briefly upon entering a building, allowing your eyes to adjust gradually to the new low-light environment. This hesitation can help prevent strain, optimize visual adjustment, and may help prevent falls.

Depth perception, the ability to perceive the distance between objects and see the world in three dimensions, can be affected when one eye has more significant degeneration. This imbalance in visual acuity between the eyes may lead to challenges in depth perception and increase the risk of falls.

Individuals with macular degeneration often face challenges related to glare and discomfort, as well as sensitivity to light, particularly in bright lighting conditions, which can significantly impair their vision. To alleviate these issues, they can consider using sunglasses, hats, or visors with brims for eye protection. Adjusting indoor lighting levels, using adjustable horizontal or vertical blinds on windows, or tinted lenses can also enhance visual comfort and clarity, while providing added safety and security.

Suppose you or someone you know is experiencing discomfort and glare sensitivity due to macular degeneration. In that case, it is advisable to consult with an eye care professional or low vision specialist for personalized recommendations and solutions tailored to these visual challenges.

## **How Can My Family and I Protect Our Vision and Reduce the Risk of Developing Macular Degeneration?**

Taking proactive steps to prevent macular degeneration is crucial, especially as you age. Annual appointments with an ophthalmologist or optometrist can help monitor your eye health and detect potential issues early on. You should undergo a thorough examination of your retina and macula. If you have cardiovascular disease or high blood pressure, staying current with medical appointments and following your doctor's advice, including taking prescribed medications, is essential for overall health and reducing the risk of developing macular degeneration.

Smoking is a known high-risk factor for macular degeneration, so if you smoke, quitting can significantly benefit your eye health. Healthy lifestyle choices such as regular exercise, maintaining a nutritious diet, and managing weight can also play a key role in preventing the development or progression of macular degeneration.

Individuals with a family history of macular degeneration are at a higher risk due to genetic factors. If you have relatives with the condition, it is even more crucial to follow preventive measures, including lifestyle changes and regular eye check-ups, to reduce risk and maintain optimal eye health.

By incorporating these preventive strategies into your daily routine and seeking guidance from healthcare professionals when needed, you can take proactive steps to protect your vision and reduce the risk of macular degeneration.

## **Steps to Protect Your Eyes and Slow the Progression of Macular Degeneration**

Protecting your eyes from ultraviolet (UV) light exposure is crucial in managing conditions like macular degeneration and maintaining overall eye health. When you're outdoors, wearing protective gear like a hat with a brim or a visor can help shield your eyes from the sun's harmful rays. Opting for a dark-colored underside on the visor can reduce reflections and minimize exposure to your eyes, as well as any eyeglasses you may be wearing. Ensuring your regular prescription glasses have UV protection is essential. Make sure to inquire about glasses with a UV coating, as this coating indicates protection against harmful UV light. It's advisable to consult your eye care provider to confirm that your glasses include sufficient UV protection.

For additional protection from UV rays, consider wearing sunglasses that can be worn over your prescription glasses. Wraparound sunglasses and other types known as fit-overs, provide complete coverage, shielding your eyes from UV light from various angles. Brands like Cocoon, Noir Medical, Eschenbach, and others offer a wide range of styles and colors in these types of sunglasses, which can be a cost-effective alternative to prescription sunglasses while still providing the necessary UV protection. Prioritizing UV protection for your eyes in various outdoor settings can help maintain eye health and potentially slow the progression of conditions like macular degeneration.

Many people find regular prescription sunglasses too dark, which may affect or compromise their vision. Exploring lighter-tinted sunglasses from different companies or optical shops can be beneficial. Lighter tints and shades enhance visibility and improve contrast, making objects and details stand out more clearly. Combining a visor or hat with these lighter sunglasses can protect against UV rays while ensuring optimal visual comfort.

A helpful tip is to put on your sunglasses just before stepping outside to avoid direct sun exposure to your eyes. Additionally, wear your sunglasses inside a building before removing them. This practice can help reduce the time needed for your eyes to adjust to changes in lighting levels, ensuring a smoother transition from outdoor to indoor environments. Implementing these strategies can enhance eye protection, vision clarity, and overall comfort for individuals managing macular degeneration.

A collection of fit-over style glasses with various shades and tints can offer flexibility for different light conditions. Opting for darker tints on bright, sunny days can help reduce glare, while lighter tints are suitable for cloudy days, as they enhance visibility in hazier or low-light situations. Lighter tints may also provide comfort in bright indoor environments, such as shopping centers.

## **Do Words Appear with Missing Letters or Blurred Characters?**

In the early stages of macular degeneration, central vision can be likened to a pie with eight slices, where one slice of the macula may be affected,

causing specific parts of words to disappear. For instance, some individuals may only see "bak" in the word "Baker" due to degeneration in a particular macula area. In contrast, others may see only "ker" if the degeneration affects a different part of the macula. As the condition progresses, multiple sections of the macular "pie" may degenerate, leading to a gradual decline in central vision.

The disease is referred to as the dry form in the early stages of macular degeneration. Under a microscope, the retina resembles a hairbrush with numerous bristle-like photoreceptors that act as antennas to capture light. When these photoreceptors degenerate, the central part of the retina may appear as a bald spot. These specialized cone photoreceptor cells are responsible for sharp, detailed vision and the perception of accurate colors.

Degeneration of these cells can lead to difficulties in tasks that require detailed vision, such as reading, recognizing faces, and driving. It's important to note that problems in the macula, the central region of the retina, do not cause blindness. Even early degeneration can significantly impact one's ability to perform everyday activities that rely on acceptable visual acuity. This loss of detailed vision can make tasks like reading, cooking, recognizing faces, and driving more challenging.

Peripheral or side vision is typically unaffected by macular degeneration in well-lit environments. Recent findings suggest that the peripheral retina is primarily responsible for dark adaptation, which can pose challenges when transitioning from brightly lit environments to darker settings. Preserving the peripheral retina in macular degeneration enables functions such as walking in familiar environments to remain intact. However, as people age, they may have more difficulty seeing at night or in low-light environments.

### **Request a Summary Letter from Your Eye Doctor and Keep a Medical File for You and Your Family**

During eye examinations, it is crucial to ask about the condition of the retina and macula to monitor any changes. Requesting a written report after each visit can help track your progress and any changes over time. If you've received a diagnosis of macular degeneration, it is highly advisable to obtain a referral to a retina specialist.

Additionally, consider asking your eye care provider for recommendations on eye vitamins that may help slow the progression of macular degeneration. Vitamins that contain antioxidants, such as vitamins C and E, zinc, lutein, and zeaxanthin, have been studied for their potential benefits in managing the intermediate form of the condition. Look for supplements labeled with AREDS II, which stands for Age-Related Eye Disease Study. Also, consult your primary care doctor before starting any new vitamin regimen.

Eye care professionals recommend that individuals have comprehensive eye examinations with dilation performed by an ophthalmologist or optometrist annually. If there are signs or symptoms indicating the early stages of macular degeneration, a referral to a retina specialist may be necessary.

Retina specialists are ophthalmologists with specialized training in diagnosing and treating conditions that affect the retina and macula, including macular degeneration. Seeking care from a retina specialist can help manage and preserve vision in retinal conditions.

These specialists possess advanced training and imaging tools that facilitate accurate diagnosis of conditions like macular degeneration. Once diagnosed, a retina specialist will provide a detailed diagnosis, recommend appropriate treatments, and monitor your vision at regular intervals to ensure optimal care and management.

In the early stages of macular degeneration, patients may need to visit the specialist every six months or annually. The progression of macular degeneration is often slow; however, as the disease advances, the retina specialist will adjust the frequency of visits to optimize management and vision preservation. Regular monitoring and personalized care from a retina specialist are crucial for effectively addressing and treating macular degeneration.

Maintaining an organized medical file with detailed reports from your eye examinations is essential for individuals undergoing assessments for macular degeneration. These records can help you and your family understand your eye health status and track changes over time. They can also be valuable for younger family members who may have a genetic

predisposition to certain eye conditions, allowing them to understand better your diagnosis, treatment plans, and potential future needs.

Moreover, a well-documented medical history can be advantageous if you seek second or third opinions from various eye care specialists, ensuring all relevant information is available for review. This can help you make informed decisions about your eye health and treatment options. Regularly updating and organizing your medical records can enhance communication with healthcare providers and support continuity of care for conditions like macular degeneration.

Having a comprehensive medical file is especially important if you need to be referred for low vision rehabilitation. (Refer to the section on Low Vision Rehabilitation later in this guide.)

It is common practice to receive a summary of each appointment through a patient's medical portal. However, individuals who have difficulty reading or accessing this information should request a complete printout of their appointment details. It is essential to obtain these records to ensure a clear understanding of your eye health status, diagnosis, treatment plan, and any recommendations made by the eye doctor and staff.

Having a physical copy of your appointment details allows you to review the information at your convenience and share it with family members as needed. Access to complete records empowers you to take an active role in your eye care and make informed decisions about managing conditions like macular degeneration.

After each eye appointment, it is recommended to request a summary letter that includes detailed information about your diagnosis and clinical findings. This summary should encompass the following details:

## **Diagnosis**

It is essential to specify the primary diagnosis, such as age-related macular degeneration (AMD), indicating whether it is the dry or wet form for each eye. The report should also detail the stage of the dry form of AMD, categorizing it as early, moderate, or late stage. The dry form can also be referred to as atrophic macular degeneration, while the late or end stage is known as geographic atrophy (GA).

For the wet form of macular degeneration, the report may describe neovascularization, which refers to the growth of new vessels beneath the retina. Terms like "exudative" may be used to characterize wet AMD. Ensure that any secondary diagnoses, such as glaucoma or cataracts, are also documented in the report for a comprehensive understanding of your eye health.

## **Visual Acuity Measurement**

Visual acuity measurement for each eye is a crucial part of eye health evaluations. This assessment is typically performed using an eye chart while the patient wears their current prescription glasses or contact lenses, a measurement known as Best Corrected Visual Acuity (BCVA). Results are usually documented with the abbreviations OD for the right eye and OS for the left eye, for example: BCVA OD: 20/70, OS: 20/50.

Normal vision is considered 20/20, where the second number indicates the clarity of vision. A lower second number signifies poorer vision. By comparing BCVA measurements across visits, you can monitor any changes in your vision. For example, if your current measurement is 20/50 compared to a previous reading of 20/40, this indicates a slight deterioration in your vision.

Understanding and monitoring your Visual Acuity Measurement is vital, as it provides insights into changes in your vision health. By tracking these measurements at each visit, you can gain a clearer picture of your eye health status and discuss any changes with your doctor. Feel free to request this information at every appointment to stay informed about your vision progress.

## **Appearance of the Retina**

When requesting a description of the retina's appearance in the summary letter from your eye appointment, include details such as the presence of drusen. Drusen may appear as tiny yellow spots on the retina, indicating that the retina is struggling to metabolize waste products.

While drusen do not directly cause vision loss, they may signal changes over time. Inquire whether there have been any changes in the size or number of drusen and the overall health of the retina and its underlying tissues. The report should summarize findings on the retina's appearance,



noting the presence of small or large drusen and any increase in their numbers since the last visit. Observations regarding whether small drusen are enlarging can also provide important information about the condition's progression. Assessing the overall health of the retina and its supporting structures is crucial, noting any abnormalities that may impact vision.

In cases of wet macular degeneration, the report should include details on neovascularization, which involves the growth of abnormal blood vessels beneath the retina. These new vessels differ from healthy ones and can lead to complications, such as fluid leakage or bleeding, which may require treatment with injections to inhibit their growth and development.

Monitoring changes in the retina's appearance during eye appointments is essential for tracking the condition's progression and determining the appropriate treatment plan. Understanding the findings in your summary letter will help you stay informed about the health of your retina and effectively manage any abnormalities that may arise.

### **Appearance of the Macula**

The report should describe the macula and any stages of degeneration, using terms like geographic atrophy to classify advanced cases of macular degeneration. Observations regarding changes in the macula can provide valuable insights into the progression of the condition and its potential impact on vision.

### **Treatment Recommended**

The report must document the treatments administered during each visit, including the name of any injected medications and recommendations for future treatments and follow-up appointments.

It is essential to ask about any newly approved treatments available for both the dry and wet forms of macular degeneration and to discuss your candidacy for these therapies with your retina specialist. Understanding the potential risks associated with any new treatments is vital for making informed decisions about your eye health.

By including information about the macula's appearance and treatment details in your appointment summary, you can gain a comprehensive

understanding of your condition, the treatments received, and the recommendations for effective management of macular degeneration. Be proactive in discussing treatment options and potential risks with your ophthalmologist to make informed choices about your eye care.

## **Prognosis**

Request an evaluation of the severity of any damage, the expected progression of macular degeneration, and anticipated timelines for each eye. Understanding the prognosis can help you and your family prepare for the condition's advancement and make informed decisions regarding future treatments or management strategies.

Having detailed information about treatments, prognosis, and potential outcomes of macular degeneration in your medical records empowers you to engage in your eye care management actively. This knowledge enhances your understanding of the condition, its implications, and available treatment options, facilitating better decision-making and the exploration of additional opinions or treatments when necessary. Stay informed, ask questions, and collaborate closely with your healthcare team to optimize both your eye health and overall well-being.

A summary letter that clearly outlines your diagnosis and its specific details is invaluable for understanding the progression of your condition, discussing treatment options, and tracking vital information related to your eye health.

## **Be Prepared and Proactive: Questions to Ask Your Eye Specialist**

You should bring the points below to your eye appointment. When speaking with your ophthalmologist, kindly request a summary of your recent visit that covers the following details:

1. Diagnosis
2. Best Corrected Visual Acuity Measurement
3. Appearance of the Retina
4. Appearance of the Macula
5. Any Recommended Treatments:
  - Name of medications issued or injections

6. Am I a Candidate for the new injections?
7. Frequency of the next visit
8. Prognosis

Next, request an Amsler Grid with Instructions for Home Use to monitor your vision over time.

## **How Can I Monitor My Vision Closely to Detect Early Changes in the Macula and Retina?**

Regularly monitoring vision changes with tools like the Amsler Grid, which features horizontal and vertical lines surrounding a central dot, can help individuals detect any new distortions or alterations in their vision. It is essential to observe the appearance of these distortions in each eye during the evaluation process, as new distortions may indicate significant changes that require attention.

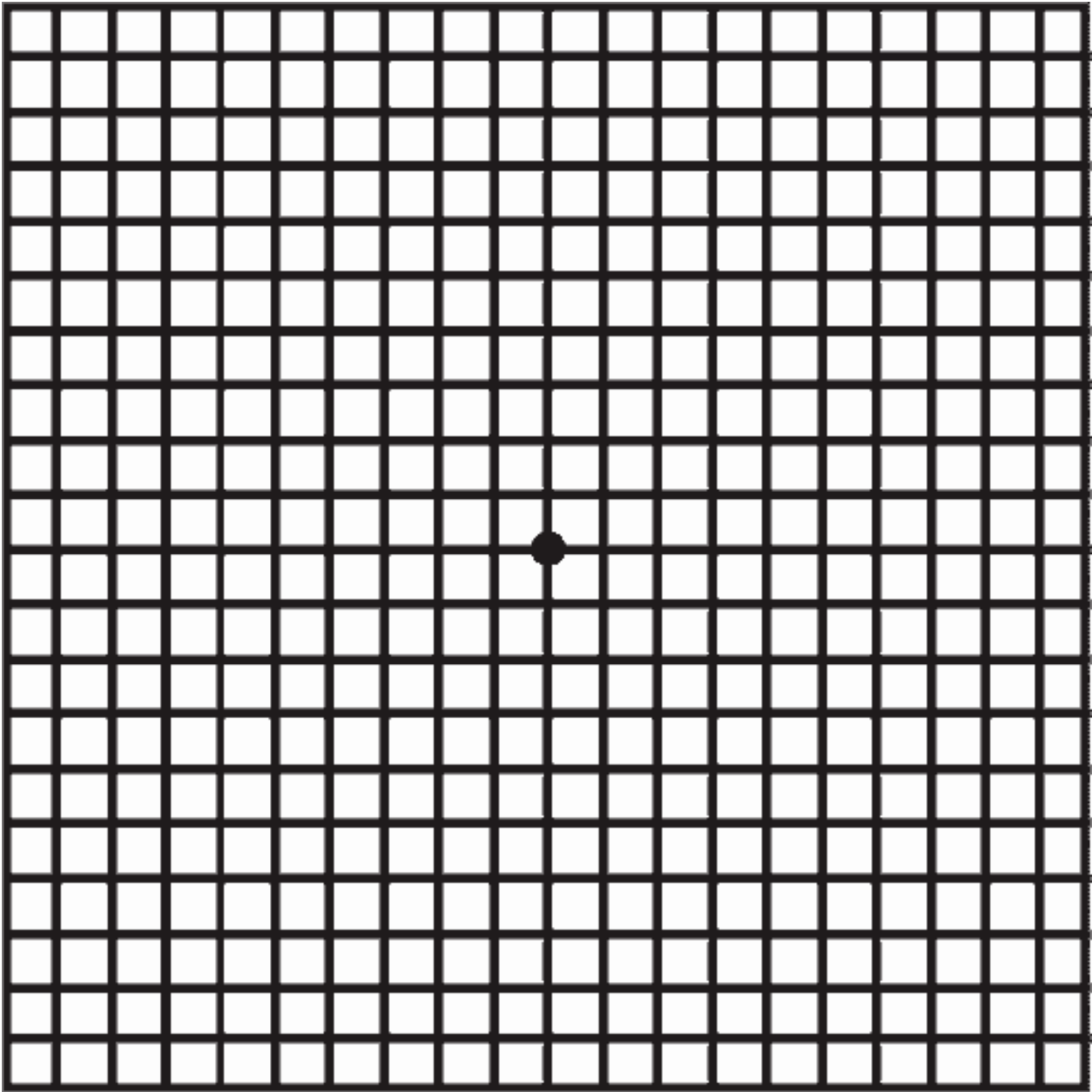
Proactive monitoring through frequent checks of the Amsler Grid—ideally conducted daily or several times a week—empowers individuals to manage their eye health by identifying potential issues early. This vigilance can help prevent emerging visual challenges and prompt timely intervention.

Monitoring for new distortions is particularly important for those with dry macular degeneration. Approximately 20% of individuals with this condition may develop abnormal blood vessel growth behind the retina, known as neovascularization, which signals a possible progression to wet macular degeneration. Early detection of these new blood vessels is crucial, as the wet form can lead to severe vision loss and complications. However, if identified early, these vessels can often be treated with injections, potentially preserving vision.

When using the Amsler Grid, individuals should look for new squiggly lines, especially those starting from the grid's edges and extending toward the center. The appearance of such distortions could indicate neovascularization and should prompt immediate evaluation by a retina specialist. Regular vision monitoring is essential, as changes can occur unexpectedly after periods of stability.

Some individuals might find the routine of grid testing tedious and may be tempted to abandon it. However, consistent monitoring with the Amsler Grid is crucial for identifying issues early and preventing potential complications associated with wet macular degeneration. Seeking thorough guidance from a healthcare professional on performing and interpreting the Amsler Grid test can help individuals better understand its significance and make informed decisions about their eye health.

Amsler Grid



## **Instructions for using the Amsler Grid**

1. Ensure you have good lighting when using the Amsler grid. Natural daylight or a bright lamp is ideal.
2. Wear your reading glasses if needed and hold the Amsler Grid at your average reading distance. Focus on the central dot in the grid with one eye covered. While staring at the dot, pay attention to the grid's straight lines, squares, and overall pattern.
3. Pay attention to where the distortions are located with each eye. Many people with macular degeneration can identify the area of the grid with missing or blank areas, as well as distorted lines or dark spots. It is crucial to note and memorize the appearance of the grid for each eye.
4. The critical part is identifying any NEW CHANGES that weren't there previously. These changes may indicate the formation of new blood vessels beneath the retina. These wavy lines often start outside the grid, such as at the top or bottom, or come in from the side. Contact your eye care provider immediately, letting them know that you have noticed new distortions on the grid that were not present previously. Insist on getting an appointment as soon as possible; do not wait weeks.
5. Regular monitoring of your central vision using the Amsler Grid is recommended, ideally daily or as your eye care provider directs. Record any changes you notice on the grid to discuss with your eye doctor during follow-up visits.
6. Using an Amsler Grid correctly and consistently can help you detect changes in your central vision and monitor the progression of macular degeneration. It is an essential tool for self-monitoring and staying proactive in managing your eye health. If you have concerns about your vision or experience any changes while using the Amsler grid, seek professional help promptly from your eye care provider.

## **Other Ways to Monitor Your Vision**

Another effective way to test for signs of visual distortion is to cover one eye and observe straight objects, such as window blinds or door frames. Pay close attention to any distortions, such as waviness or abrupt changes in shape. If the blinds or door frames appear crooked or bent, this could indicate potential problems at the back of the eye, such as new blood vessel growth.

If you notice any new distortions that weren't present before, it is crucial to seek medical attention promptly. Aim to schedule an appointment within a few days, rather than waiting weeks, to address any new visual changes that may have occurred. Early detection and intervention are essential for effectively managing eye health issues.

Regularly testing one eye at a time by looking across the room or into open spaces is a good practice. If you see a shadow or a large dark area in your vision, this may indicate a retinal or partial retinal detachment. Prompt action in these situations is critical, as delaying treatment can lead to further complications. A torn retina can often be surgically repaired, underscoring the importance of seeking immediate medical assistance rather than waiting for symptoms to worsen.

Individuals experiencing visual disturbances should not hesitate to seek medical help, especially if they have experienced head trauma, falls, or head injuries. It is vital to assess each eye separately and check visual fields in all directions—up, down, left, and right. This is particularly important for those with severe nearsightedness, as they may be at a higher risk for retinal issues.

Such individuals should also take extra precautions to avoid head injuries or falls that could exacerbate their condition. Early detection and prompt intervention are crucial for preserving vision and preventing complications from retinal detachments.