



MEDIA RELEASE

Smoking can cause vision loss from macular degeneration – but awareness of the link is alarmingly low, according to international study

September 19, 2005 – Smoking, long understood to cause fatal conditions like heart disease and lung cancer, is also a major contributor to the disability most of us fear most – blindness.

Yet few of us are aware of the connection, according to a global report just released by the AMD Alliance International, which calls current awareness levels “worrying.”

“Smoking is the only proven and preventable risk factor for age-related macular degeneration, or AMD, an eye disease that the World Health Organization recognizes as the leading cause of blindness in developed countries,” says Gerrard Grace, Chair, AMD Alliance International. “But governments are not doing a good enough job of letting people know about it.”

Numerous studies using the same criteria that have been applied to prove the link between smoking and lung cancer have shown that smoking causes blindness, says the report. These studies scientifically prove that people who smoke are at risk to lose some or all of their vision – they are two to four times as likely to develop AMD when compared to a non-smoker.

But awareness of AMD itself is startlingly low, according to interviews with more than 15,000 people in 14 countries conducted by EOS Gallop Europe for the report. Awareness levels, at their highest, were only 20 to 30% in the United States, Canada, and Australia, while elsewhere, particularly in Europe, South Africa, Hong Kong, and Japan, levels were much lower.

The poll showed that even among those few who were aware of AMD, only 32% could identify that smoking was a risk factor for the disease. “It’s a terrifying knowledge gap,” says Mr. Grace. “People don’t have the crucial information they need to make an informed decision to safeguard the health of their eyes. Patients are losing their sight – and in many cases, it could have been prevented.”

Pauline Edwards agrees. “If I had been told that I could lose my sight because of smoking I am sure I would have given up earlier,” she says. The 50-year-old nurse from the United Kingdom has lost some of her vision in one eye and is likely to lose her sight altogether from AMD. “I stopped the day I found out,” she says firmly.

At least one country is making some headway in closing the knowledge gap. Government awareness programs in Australia have warned about the link through a major anti-smoking advertising campaign with hard-hitting pictures. Calls to quit help lines are increasing along with awareness in that country, proving that the fear of blindness is a powerful incentive to give up smoking.

AMD Awareness Week – held annually by the AMD Alliance International, with local events in member countries – takes place this year from September 19 to 24, a perfect opportunity to get the word out about smoking.

“Basically we have two messages,” says Mr. Grace. “We are telling governments that raising awareness about the link between smoking and macular degeneration is an absolute moral imperative that also makes strong economic sense in terms of health and long-term care costs. And for individuals, our message is ‘Do not smoke – and if you do, give some serious thought to quitting.’”

The AMD Alliance International is a global non-profit coalition of 55 organizations in 21 countries working to raise awareness of age-related macular degeneration (AMD), the leading cause of vision loss in the developed world. The Alliance promotes prevention, treatments, rehabilitation, and support services for AMD, and advocates for ongoing medical research and health care policies that will make treatment and rehabilitation options accessible and affordable for everyone.

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Media who would like more information or to arrange for an interview or obtain a copy of the “AMD Campaign Report 2005” should contact:

[\[fill in with local contact information\]](#)

Wanda Hamilton
Executive Director, AMD Alliance International
(416) 486-2500 ext. 7505
Email: executivedirector@amdalliance.org

For more information about AMD, the public should contact [\[fill in local information\]](#):

Toll-Free: 1-877-AMD-7171 (U.S./Canada)

www.amdalliance.org

info@amdalliance.org

AMD Awareness Week 2005 Activities: www.amdalliance.org/amd-week