

Celebrating 20 Years of Awareness of Macular Diseases Week



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2024 marked 20 years since the inaugural Awareness of Macular Diseases Week (AMD Week). It is an annual public health campaign that aims to increase the awareness and understanding of macular diseases by emphasising the importance of education, early detection, and knowledge of treatment and rehabilitation options.

Enhancing education and awareness

Age-related macular degeneration is a leading cause of vision impairment in adults over 60 years old.¹ A study found that in 2015, more than 125,000 Singaporeans aged 40 and over were living with age-related macular degeneration, and this number is expected to approach 200,000 by 2040.² Despite its growing local prevalence, public awareness of the condition was once limited, but has increased gradually over the past two decades with the introduction of AMD Week.

AMD Week first began in 2005 as Age-related Macular Degeneration Awareness Week. In 2017, the public health campaign was renamed AMD Week to include more macular diseases such as myopic macular degeneration, diabetic eye disease, epiretinal membranes and macular holes. Raising awareness about macular diseases is crucial to mitigate its impact on the

quality of life of those affected. Early detection is key to allowing timely intervention and reducing the risk of irreversible vision loss. Educating patients about the risk factors for certain conditions can encourage lifestyle changes that can lower their risk of developing these conditions. The impact of macular diseases on the daily activities and independence of those affected highlights the need to educate the public on this disease.

AMD Week not only emphasises the significance of early detection but also reflects on the progress of treatment options for age-related macular degeneration and diabetic retinopathy. Merely 20 years ago, treatment for wet macular degeneration was limited to variants of laser therapy. These treatments could stop leakages and bleeding but often resulted in scarring and central vision loss. Research breakthroughs have led to more advanced treatments for wet macular degeneration, such as monoclonal antibodies targeting growth factors that stimulate abnormal blood vessel growth. This is a highly effective treatment, though it requires frequent injections, which can be burdensome for patients. Through the awareness raised by AMD Week, more people have become informed about these evolving and improved sight-saving treatment

options. It also highlights the importance of education and research in the field.

The birth of AMD Week

Adj A/Prof Au Eong Kah Guan spearheaded the inception of AMD Week 20 years ago when he was a member of the Scientific Advisory Panel of AMD Alliance International, a non-profit global alliance of organisations working to raise awareness of age-related macular degeneration in collaboration with Singapore Action Group of Elders. A/Prof Au Eong noted, "The push for AMD Week was driven by a fundamental need to address the growing challenge of age-related macular degeneration in a rapidly ageing local population. Our vision was to transform the landscape of eye health by educating the public, promoting early detection, and ensuring that more people receive the treatment they need to preserve their vision."

Although both organisations are now defunct, the campaign lives on. It was organised annually by the Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences in Alexandra Hospital, and later by the same department when it moved to Khoo Teck Puat Hospital.

The campaign actively engages ophthalmologists, optometrists and opticians from both the public and





private sectors to increase its reach within the community. Activities such as public health talks conducted in various languages, eye screenings, patient support group meetings, smoking cessation campaigns, healthy cooking demonstrations and art exhibitions are held across the nation. For instance, in 2010, an art exhibition featured portraits created by patients with age-related macular degeneration, offering insight into the visual distortions and abnormalities caused by the disease as seen through the eyes of those affected.³ These efforts continue to promote a greater understanding of age-related macular degeneration and its impact.

Over the years, the nationwide collaborative effort of community outreach attracted more and more participants, including the Singapore Optometric Association, Society of Opticianry Practitioners (Singapore), Health Promotion Board, patient support groups, Singapore Association of the Visually Handicapped, and many other organisations. A special commemorative book, titled *A Vision for the Nation: A Decade of AMD Awareness Campaign in Singapore*, was published in 2014 by Dr Ajeet Madhav Wagle and his team to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the campaign in 2014, where then Senior Minister of State Dr Amy Khor graced the launch.

"The awareness of age-related macular degeneration in Singapore was quite low compared to awareness levels in many western countries as recent as 2006. The establishment of AMD Week helped to significantly increase the awareness of age-related macular degeneration in Singapore from 7.3%

in 2006 to 28% in 2011," said Dr Ajeet Madhav Wagle, who led the AMD Week campaign from 2008 to 2011 as the chairman of the organising committee.

20 years and beyond

AMD Week 2024 was launched on 5 October 2024 and chaired by Dr Siddharth Subramani, consultant ophthalmologist at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital. The 2024 run saw a week of public health talks on macular diseases in multiple languages, discounted eye screening at numerous locations, a media outreach campaign including awareness videos on Instagram created by influential content creators, the launch of a healthy eating cookbook, and an extensive array of health promotional booths set up by partners and sponsors during the launch event. The event was held in conjunction with the Geriatric Health Carnival and included additional booths such as diabetes screening, memory testing and falls assessment. In addition, a special half-day scientific programme for opticians, optometrists and optometry students was held in collaboration with Ngee Ann Polytechnic to equip them with the latest knowledge and updates in the field of macular diseases.

The ultimate goal of AMD Week is to make every Singaporean aware of macular degeneration, to know how to detect it early and to seek advice in a timely manner. Early detection and treatment can save sight and enable individuals to lead more fruitful and independent lives.

AMD Week continues to play a crucial role in educating the public and healthcare professionals about macular degeneration. Through nationwide

outreach and early detection initiatives, the campaign aims to protect the vision and quality of life of Singaporeans who are at risk of macular degeneration. As our population ages, raising awareness and encouraging timely intervention remains vital in the fight against this sight-threatening condition. ♦

References

1. Cheung CMG, Li X, Cheng CY, et al. Prevalence, racial variations, and risk factors of age-related macular degeneration in Singaporean Chinese, Indians, and Malays. *Ophthalmology* 2014; 121(8):1598-603.
2. Ansah JP, Koh V, de Korne DF, et al. Projection of Eye Disease Burden in Singapore. *Ann Acad Med Singap* 2018; 47(1):13-28.
3. Sanjay S, Wagle AM, Hahn A, Au Eong KG. Seeing through the eyes of patients with age-related macular degeneration. *Ann Acad Med Singap* 2021; 50(3):283-4.

Legend

1. Group photo during AMD Week 2023 including Guest of Honour Mr Derek Goh, Member of Parliament for Nee Soon GRC
2. Ophthalmologists at the eye screening station at Goodlife Khatib during AMD Week 2024 launch

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