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Macular Degeneration

How Acupuncture Can Help You See

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When thinking about the “five senses”, most would agree that our vision and eyesight are the most important sense.

Difficulty in seeing can affect our entire life, from the ability to complete daily tasks, our ability to form relationships with others, and our sense of self-worth. One of the leading causes of irreversible blindness in North America is the occurrence of Age-Related Macular Degeneration (AMD or ARMD).

Traditional Chinese Medicine has recognized this disease for thousands of years, and has grouped it into the category of "blurring vision". However, I have found clinically that trying to treat the symptom of "blurring vision" to be too generic. Western medicine has identified roughly 10,000 diseases associated with the eye, and many of them can have symptoms of blurring vision. So while we must be able to differentiate the root differentiation effectively, an understanding of the physiology of the eye is also key to understanding the causative factors and treatment action.

Macular degeneration is linked to aging and primarily affects people over the age of 50, but there are cases of juvenile macular degeneration, called Stargardt’s disease. The risk of getting age-related macular degeneration increases from 2% in your 50s, up to 30% after 75. It is estimated that roughly 11 million people suffer from this in the United States alone. Worldwide, the number of people living with macular degeneration is expected to reach 196 million by 2020.

Macular degeneration refers to the systemic breakdown of the macula, the portion in the back of the eye which contains the photoreceptors responsible for detecting light and making vision possible. Macular degeneration has a gradual onset and first presents as a blurring in the central vision. Objects may appear blurred or wavy, and there may be difficulty focusing on objects. As the disease progresses, the blind spot in the central vision enlarges, and the end prognosis is complete blindness. An accompanying characteristic is the formation of drusen deposits. Drusen is a collection of yellow or white deposits, made up of fatty lips and extracellular material. The drusen accumulates in the retina and can block the function of the photoreceptors. There are also two different types of macular degeneration, “dry” and “wet”. Dry macular degeneration encompasses 90% of cases, the term “dry” referring to the lack of bleeding present in the retina. Wet macular degeneration encompasses 10% of cases and is always an advanced form of dry-type. Wet macular degeneration occurs when abnormal blood vessels leak blood into the macula. This will occlude vision even further, and have long lasting effects that damage the retina.

There is currently no known cure for macular degeneration. However, there are a few drugs that help to prevent the progression to the wet-type, as well as attempt to slow progression of the disease. These drugs are injected directly into the eye, usually every few weeks.

Clinically, there are some very simple ways to track the progression and improvement of patients suffering from macular degeneration. One of the best methods is the use of a visual acuity chart (both near and far) to determine their ability to read and recognize letters. As the patient improves, they should be able to read further down the chart, and recognize the letters easier. Another method is the use of an Amsler grid. A patient with AMD will see the lines on the grid as wavy, but as they progress, the waviness should diminish.

In TCM theory, the back of the eye (retina) is attributed to the Kidney energy.

The age-related degeneration changes result from a deficiency of the Kidney essence. As Kidney-Jing declines, the nourishment to the upper body and retina decreases, resulting in the breakdown of the macula. In addition, our central vision can
be attributed to yin energy, and peripheral vision corresponds to yang. Thus, macular degeneration treatment involves tonification of Kidney-Yin and Kidney-Jing. A typical formula for this would be Qi Ju Di Huang Tang. Acupuncture points which would benefit are KID-7 (fuliu), UB-23 (shenshu), and UB-67(zhiyin).

Progression of the dry-type to the wet-type indicates a progression from a Kidney pattern to a Spleen pattern. The Spleen is responsible for containing the blood within the vessels. Thus, an impairment of the Spleen may cause the bleeding in the retina, characteristic of the wet-AMD. For this reason, treatments should also focus on nourishing the Spleen and the Earth element. A typical formula for this would be Bu Zhong Yi Qi Tang. Acupuncture points which would benefit are St-36 (zusanli), UB-20 (pishu), and Du-4 (mingmen).

Findings of drusen in the retina must be confirmed by an optometrist or ophthalmologist. This is typically done through a fundus examination wherein they view the back of the eye through the pupil via an ophthalmoscope. Findings of drusen will indicate an accumulation of Phlegm-dampness in the body. Predominantly yellow drusen will indicate heat type and white drusen will indicate cold. Thus, findings of drusen should also focus on the elimination of phlegm-dampness from the body by adding a formula such as Er Chen Tang.

As Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioners, we know that the body cannot be divided into individual subsections, but rather our health is integrated and relies on our whole body working in harmony to function properly.

It is imperative that we continue this strategy of holism when addressing disease, and attempting to gain harmony with our Western counterparts in medicine.

- Ryan Longenecker

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryan Tze-Wai Longenecker is the owner and clinician of the award-winning Avenue Acupuncture clinic in Toronto, ON. For the past 10 years, his clinical focus has been on the treatment of chronic pain and degenerative eye diseases. He is an acupuncture instructor and has trained martial arts for the past 20 years.

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