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Vitamins, Exercise Play Important Role in Eye Health

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Vitamins and other nutritional supplements can help patients in the early stages of an incurable, blinding eye disease maintain better vision, Austin ophthalmic surgeon Jim McNabb, MD, told physicians attending TexMed2005, the Texas Medical Association's annual convention, in Grapevine.

"I recommend to early macular degeneration patients that they use nutrition," Dr. McNabb said. "I give patients who are interested a 'Vitamins 101' sheet and encourage them to take Vitamin C, extra Vitamin E, fish oil, calcium, and magnesium."

Macular degeneration is a disease of the retina that causes blindness. Dr. McNabb said he's seeing more patients with macular degeneration now than 30 years ago. The disease has no cure and is prevalent among people with freckles and red-hair. "This disease destroys your central vision. You are left with peripheral vision only," Dr. McNabb said.

During his "Nutritional Treatments of Eye Diseases" presentation, Dr. McNabb touted the benefits not only of vitamins and nutritional supplements but also of aerobic exercise in tackling cataracts, glaucoma, conjunctivitis, and inflammation. Patients can take charge of their eye health by taking supplements, a cost-effective action that he said has few complications.

Dr. McNabb's interest in nutrition increased after he experienced a his own health challenge involving high cholesterol. He became a vegetarian for a year, but his cholesterol was still high. Once he lowered his carbohydrate intake and lost 25 pounds though, his cholesterol nose-dived.

"Nutrition is the key to holistic health care. I want to raise physicians' awareness about nutrition," Dr. McNabb said. "Patients want reliable nutrition information preferably from their physicians rather than the clerk at Central Market."

Two years ago he became a certified nutritional specialist through the Society of Clinical Nutrition. He said this nutritional continuing medical education is based on science and research and involved extensive coursework along with a four-hour exam.

"To prevent cataracts, I encourage patients to take 500 milligrams of Vitamin C twice a day. Aerobic conditioning can reduce pressure in glaucoma patients," said Dr. McNabb, 65, who has practiced ophthalmology for 35 years in Austin. "Omega 3 oil decreases inflammation. You can find Omega 3 in cold water fish, salmon, tuna, haddock, cod, and sardines."

McNabb said he didn't have any statistics to back his claims other than his patients' results.

"I plan to start some studies in several areas including glaucoma."

He cites a vitamin called Eye-Caps which appeared in the mid-80s. Dr. McNabb said it was supposed to

help retinas. After his patients got good results, he became hooked in nutrition as an alternative for chronic eye disease sufferers.

While McNabb says some patients are interested in nutrition and exercise, "a surprising number of them aren't. They just want to be fixed but don't want to do anything." He said he doesn't force anything on those who aren't interested.

TMA is the largest state medical society in the nation, representing more than 40,000 physician and medical student members. It is located in Austin and has 120 component county medical societies around the state. TMA's key objective since 1853 is to improve the health of all Texans.

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