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NEWS RELEASE

February is Macular Degeneration Awareness Month

February is Macular Degeneration Month, when the Otsego County Department of Health is raising awareness of this eye condition and how to reduce your risk of getting it.

Macular degeneration, also known as age-related macular degeneration or AMD, causes deterioration of the macula, the central area of the retina, the paper-thin tissue at the back of the eye where light sensitive cells send visual signals to the brain. Sharp, clear, straight-ahead vision is processed by the macula, and damage to it results in blind spots and blurred or distorted vision.

Those affected by macular degeneration find many daily activities, such as driving and reading, increasingly difficult. Macular degeneration usually affects individuals older than 50 years of age, and scientific evidence shows that genes may play a role in the development of nearly three out of four cases of this devastating eye disease.

Age is a prominent risk factor for age-related macular degeneration. Although AMD may occur during middle age, people over age 60 are at greater risk than other age groups.

Among Americans between the ages of 50-59, about four percent have either intermediate or advanced macular degeneration, but by ages 70-79, this increases to 14.4 percent.

Other risk factors include smoking, family history of macular degeneration, gender, obesity, prolonged sun exposure, a high fat diet and/or one that is low in nutrients and antioxidants, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease.

There are two forms of macular degeneration: dry and wet. The dry form results when the light sensitive cells of the macula slowly break down. It's the most common type, accounting for 85-90 percent of diagnosed cases and can progress through early, intermediate and advanced stages. The wet form of the condition accounts for only 10 percent of cases, but results in 90 percent of legal blindness.

Wet AMD occurs when abnormal blood vessels behind the retina start to grow under the macula. These new blood vessels tend to be very fragile and often leak blood and fluid. The blood and fluid raise the macula from its normal place at the back of the eye. Damage to the macula occurs rapidly. Wet macular degeneration is always preceded by the dry form of the disease.

To diagnose macular degeneration, you need to see an eye care professional. Special tests can be performed that will test visual acuity.

When diagnosed early, vision rehabilitation and low vision aids can help improve the quality of life for those who are visually impaired. A healthy lifestyle may help reduce the risk of developing macular degeneration.

The Otsego County Department of Health recommends the following to help protect your eyesight:

- Don't smoke.
- Exercise regularly.
- Keep blood pressure in a normal range and control other medical conditions.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Eat a diet high in fruits, vegetables and fish.
- Protect eyes from overexposure to sunlight with sunglasses and hats.

For more information about Macular Degeneration and how to reduce your risk, call the (local health agency name) at (telephone number).