

The eyes have it

Warming vegie-packed soups and winter casseroles present the ideal opportunity to eat for eye health

STORY CATHERINE SAXELBY

When you were a kid, did your mum tell you to eat up your carrots so you would see better? The latest research suggests that she may have been right. The nutrients in orange, green and yellow produce – all antioxidants that belong to a large family of more than 600 carotenoids – are the magic ingredients that can slow the progression of age-related macular degeneration (AMD), a debilitating loss of vision in older people. Just as there are optimum ways of eating for a healthy heart, liver, skin, brain and kidneys, so there is now one for the eyes.

AMD affects one in four Australians over 75, and is responsible for around 80 per cent of blindness. As the population ages, more and more cases of AMD will emerge so anything we can do to prevent or limit this eye affliction is of enormous benefit. The macula is the sensitive central part of the retina (the inside lining of the eye), responsible for the fine central vision that allows us to read, recognise faces and drive. With age the macula can deteriorate, which results in blurred vision, letters missing when reading, straight lines appearing wavy and even a black 'emptiness' in the centre of vision.

Exactly what causes AMD is still not fully understood. But if you have a parent with AMD, you have a 50 per cent risk of suffering

from it yourself. Smokers have a four times greater risk than non-smokers, and those with high blood pressure, obesity or high cholesterol are also likely to suffer from it.

Lutein and zeaxanthin are two carotenoid pigments in the eye that are most concentrated in the macula. They absorb damaging UV and blue light, and protect individual cells in the retina. Dark leafy greens are rich in lutein and zeaxanthin, while colourful fruits and vegetables are also good sources (so remember to 'eat by the rainbow' – lots of colour is a good rule of thumb). So are egg yolks, and some brands of eggs are now fortified with lutein.

Cooking oils recently came under scrutiny after a research paper suggested a link to AMD and urged consumers not to use oil and go back to butter. Associate Professor Robyn Guymar, head of the Macular Research Unit at the Centre for Eye Research Australia at the University of Melbourne, denies a firm link between any type of fat and AMD exists.

"When you look at the research published to date, there is not enough evidence to suggest one fat or another," she explains. "The notion that oils were to blame came from one research finding in the US where the type of fats eaten are very different to those consumed by Australians – soybean oil is used extensively in the US and many of their margarines are high in trans fats, unlike ours. There are many other studies – including an Australian one, The Blue Mountains Eye Study – which found no association with fat. So why just pick out one study?" she added.

On the other hand fish, or rather their omega-3s, are reported to protect against the development and progression of AMD. Until definitive research appears, Professor Guymar advises her patients to follow a healthy low-fat diet that favours monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats, which are pivotal in reducing cholesterol and heart disease. ►



TOP SIGHT-SAVERS

MD develops in similar ways to cataracts (around 30 per cent of people in their mid-70s have had at least one cataract operation). Looking after yourself in your later years can have a significant impact on how long your eyesight lasts. So try to:

- Avoid smoking
- Maintain a healthy weight that's right for you – neither too fat nor too thin
- Eat large serves of green vegetables and salad leaves as often as you can
- Enjoy different-coloured fruits and vegetables for natural antioxidants and, if you are over 60 or at risk (see above), take a daily supplement with vitamins C and E, zinc and lutein
- Use oils rich in monounsaturated fat (olive, canola) or polyunsaturated fat (sunflower, grapeseed); limit intake of saturated fats (dairy, takeaway, deli meats)
- Enjoy fish twice a week
- Stay active to help manage your blood pressure and cholesterol

“Carotenoids are the magic ingredients that can slow MD”

