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## **Focus on healthy eating habits for healthy eyes**

LAWRENCEVILLE – The adage “you are what you eat” doesn’t apply only to the waistline. A person’s diet affects every aspect of his or her body, including the eyes.

In fact, a balanced diet is essential not only for maintaining daily eye health, but also in helping protect against common ailments such as macular degeneration and cataracts, according to Kimberly Friedman, O.D., president of the New Jersey Society of Optometric Physicians (NJSOP).



According to Friedman, more than 22 million Americans suffer from cataracts (a clouding of the natural lens and the leading cause of visual loss among adults 55 and older) and age-related macular degeneration (AMD), which is a hardening of the arteries that nourish the retina. Research by the National Eye Institute and countless studies and surveys indicate a positive correlation between good nutrition and prevention of AMD and cataracts.

“Simply incorporating healthy foods into your diet can help prevent these two leading causes of visual loss and blindness,” Friedman said. “Especially when you consider cataracts require costly surgery, and treatment options for AMD are currently limited, it makes sense to take preventive measures to head off potential problems.”

For people of any age, Friedman notes the following examples of nutrition-related eye problems that merit consideration:

- Severe vitamin A deficiency is the major cause of childhood blindness in the world. More than half a million preschool-age children throughout the world lose their sight each year due to vitamin A deficiency.
- “Night blindness” is one of the first detectable signs of vitamin A deficiency. Night blindness occurs when the retina doesn’t receive enough retinal to regenerate the light-bleached visual pigments. People lose the ability to recover quickly from a temporary blinding that follows a flash of bright light at night (such as from car headlights) or after a light goes out. Because of the deficiency, recovery takes much longer than a few seconds, which can be dangerous in some situations.

“These are extreme examples of the damage poor nutrition can cause, but they get people re-evaluating their eating habits,” Friedman said.

(More)

So what types of foods are eye healthy? Friedman said most people are familiar with the link between carrots and good eye health, but there are many other foods that will do the trick. Key nutrients for eye health include:

- Vitamin C, which can be found in oranges, grapefruits, strawberries, papayas, green peppers and tomatoes;
- Vitamin E, which is more difficult to obtain from food sources because it is found in very small quantities. However, vegetable oils (safflower and corn oil), almonds, pecans, wheat germ and sunflower seeds are good sources;
- Beta-carotene, which is present in dark-green leafy vegetables such as spinach, deep orange or yellow fruits such as carrots, mangos, sweet potatoes, cantaloupe, apricots and peaches, and fortified cereals.
- Lutein and zeaxanthin, which are found together in many food sources. Dark-green leafy vegetables such as kale, collard greens and spinach are primary sources, but they are also present in lesser amounts in other colorful fruits and vegetables such as broccoli, orange peppers, corn, peas, persimmons and tangerines; and
- Zinc, which is found in abundance in meat, liver, shellfish, milk, whole grains and wheat germ.

“A healthy diet is as good for your eyes as it is for your entire body,” Friedman said. “Proper nutrition is essential for looking good *and* seeing well.”

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*The New Jersey Society of Optometric Physicians is dedicated to improving the quality, availability and accessibility of eye/vision care. For more information, visit [www.njsop.org](http://www.njsop.org).*