

SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

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PATIENTS NEEDED FOR \$2.6 MILLION RESEARCH PROJECT SEEKING TO IDENTIFY MACULAR DEGENERATION GENES

DALLAS – Jan. 13, 2004 – Researchers at UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas are looking for families in which three or more members suffer from age-related macular degeneration to participate in a study designed to determine the genes responsible for the disease.

Macular degeneration is a complex disease that is the leading cause of blindness in Americans over age 50. The macula is an area in the center of the retina where light is focused and changed into nerve signals to compose an image in the brain. This central, or “macular,” vision enables people to read, drive and do things requiring fine, sharp, straight-ahead vision.

By age 75, an estimated 30 percent of Americans have at least some manifestation of macular degeneration, said principle investigator Dr. Albert Edwards, assistant professor of ophthalmology. He was among the first researchers to identify the general locations of the genes responsible.

“By finding genes, we can understand where the biological pathways are and the processes involved in the disease,” said Dr. Edwards, principal investigator of the \$2.6 million, five-year grant awarded by the National Institutes of Health. “Once we determine which genes are responsible, we can screen the population and manipulate biological pathways to develop treatments.”

Researchers hope that examining families will help them home in on the culprit genes faster because family members share similar genes.

“We know that one of the most significant factors in determining who gets macular degeneration is family history,” Dr. Edwards said.

People with a family history of macular degeneration have a 50 percent chance of developing the disease compared to a 12 percent chance for those without a family history, Dr. Edwards said.

Other risk factors for the disease include smoking, early menopause, hypertension and

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cardiovascular disease, prolonged sun exposure and a diet high in certain fats commonly found in snack foods.

Study participants must have been diagnosed with macular degeneration and also have three or more living relatives with it in two or more generations. Participants would have photographs taken of their eyes and give a blood sample. Those interested should call 214-648-3838.

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