

Eye expert leads calls for blindness warnings on cigarettes

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An eye expert based at Southampton's university hospitals has called for new health warnings on cigarettes to highlight smokers' increased risk of blindness.

Andrew Lotery, a professor of ophthalmology at the University of Southampton and consultant ophthalmologist at Southampton General Hospital, also said genetic testing for age-related macular degeneration (AMD) – the leading cause of blindness in the western world – could help cut the number of smokers.

He spoke out after new research, published in journal Eye, which found less than half of patients in Southampton (47%) were aware of the link between smoking and eye disease, but more than two-thirds (67%) would be likely to or would definitely quit smoking if told they had a high genetic risk of developing AMD.

Smokers, in addition to being four times more likely to develop the condition compared to past or non-smokers, are further exposed if they have a high genetic risk factor and it is estimated smoking contributes to around 20% of blindness in people over 50.

“While people are well aware smoking is a leading cause of cancer, respiratory problems and heart disease, there is little knowledge of its association with AMD and blindness,” says Prof Lotery.

“Eye health has long been the victim of apathy within health services

across the world and, in turn, this has led to the growth of a culture of neglect among individuals unaware of the consequences of their actions.”

AMD, which can be either ‘wet’ or ‘dry’, occurs when the cells of the macula become damaged and stop working. Although wet macular degeneration can be stabilised using a new class of drugs called anti-VEGF agents, there is no cure or treatment for dry AMD, the most common form.

More than three-quarters (75.5%) of participants said they would consider taking a genetic test for AMD, which affects one in three elderly people by the age of 75, but Prof Lotery said the need for more general guidance is the immediate priority among ophthalmologists.

“Although our primary aim was to discover whether or not knowledge of genetic risk for AMD could influence the motivation to quit smoking and to begin to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of routine genetic testing, it is clear there is a wider need to alert people of the link between smoking and [blindness](#),” he said.

“The immediate priority is to ensure all smokers, regardless of genetic factors, are aware of the dangers and I am calling for serious consideration of warnings on cigarette packets akin to those introduced in Australia in 2006 which led to a doubling of the number of requests to the country’s quitters service within a year.”

Prof Lotery, who established pioneering charity the Gift of Sight appeal in 2004 to fund his team’s research into complex eye disease, identified a major new genetic association with AMD – SERPING1 – which is faulty in up to 25% of sufferers in 2008 and is currently working on the development of stem cell therapies to treat the condition.

Provided by University of Southampton

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