Many smokers are unaware of the link between tobacco smoking and blindness. The most common form of blindness caused by smoking is age-related macular degeneration.\(^1\)

Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is a disease affecting the macula, which is the central part of the retina at the back of the eye that provides vision for daily tasks such as driving, reading and recognising faces. The disease causes irreversible loss of central vision.\(^2\) It is usually related to ageing and most commonly affects people over 50 years of age.

Age-related macular degeneration is a progressive condition and there is currently no cure.\(^3,4\) The most important known preventable risk factor for developing age-related macular degeneration is tobacco consumption.\(^2,5\)

Current smokers have four times the risk of developing age-related macular degeneration than past smokers or non-smokers.\(^5,6\) Smokers may also develop the disease about 10 years earlier than non-smokers.\(^1,7\)

The number of years you smoke and the number of cigarettes smoked increases the risk of developing age-related macular degeneration.\(^1,8,9\)

Estimates are there could be as many as 70,000 New Zealanders who may have age-related macular degeneration.\(^10\) It is estimated that smoking causes or contributes to around 20 percent of new blindness in people over 50 years old.\(^6\)

In many cases, eliminating smoking may prevent age-related macular degeneration.\(^2\) If you quit smoking, your risk of developing age-related macular degeneration decreases the longer you stay off cigarettes. Twenty years after quitting, your risk is the same as someone who has never smoked.\(^1,9,11\)
There is also some evidence of increased risk for age-related macular degeneration in non-smokers exposed to passive smoking.8

Smoking also increases your risk of developing other eye problems such as cataracts. A cataract is the clouding of the eye’s naturally clear lens.2 As a result, the amount of light that can pass through is reduced and the image cannot be properly focused on the retina in the eye.2,12 Cataracts are another leading cause of blindness and smokers are two to three times more likely to develop cataracts than non-smokers.13

The number of years you smoke and the number of cigarettes smoked increases the risk of developing a cataract.12,14,15

Want to quit smoking? The most important thing is to make a quit attempt. For help, talk to your doctor, pharmacist, quit smoking provider or call the Quitline on 0800 778 778 or visit The Quit Group web site at www.quit.org.nz

Sources: