

## **Keep Your Eyes Fit and Young Along with the Rest of Your Body: Part One of a Two-Part Series**

By Deborah Banker, MD

Most people agree that we spend a great deal of time and energy trying to look fit, young and attractive, but do we really view the internal workings of our bodies with the same attention and respect that we place on the packaging? Would we try to be more supportive of this dynamic system if we understood what vitamins, nutrients and foods keep us young at a cellular level?

A study by the Harvard School of Public Health (reprinted in the *Archives of Ophthalmology*) found, by examining the diets of 50,000 nurses, that women with the highest beta carotene and vitamin A intake had a 39% lower risk of cataracts severe enough to require surgery than women getting the least amount.

A cataract is the aging process of the normal lens of the eye, which becomes yellowed and cloudy from oxidation and protein breakdown. The opacification of the crystalline lens of the eye, cataracts develop later in life and are most likely the consequence of decades of accumulated damage to the long-lived lens proteins. Clinical studies (*Archives of Ophthalmology*, July 2001) on the "long-term nutrient intake and early age-related nuclear lens opacities" suggest that much of this damage is the result of oxidation, and that antioxidants may protect the lens against formulation of cataracts.

Several studies suggest that people who take multivitamin/mineral supplements are less likely to develop cataracts. A study from Harvard University found that doctors who regularly took multivitamin/multimineral supplements cut their risk of developing cataracts by about one-fourth compared with those not taking supplements. Another study by Canadian researchers found that targeted supplements reduced cataract formation by 40%.

Vitamin A and beta carotene (a substance converted by the body to vitamin A) are necessary for sight to occur and are known to help prevent oxidative damage to the lens. Vitamin A enters the bloodstream, is picked up by the eye and is converted into a substance called retinol, which is necessary for the chemical electrical reaction that allows the retina to see. While carrots are found to offer protection, other vitamin rich foods also seem to be important. A different protective effect has been found from spinach, which doesn't contain as much beta carotene, but has antioxidant compounds such as lutein and zeaxanthin. These substances in the eye are important in preventing both macular degeneration and cataracts. Other natural rich sources of vitamin A are apricots; asparagus; beet greens; broccoli; butter; butternut squash; cantaloupe; carrots; cheese; eggs; milk products; dandelion greens; green and yellow fruits and vegetables; green olives; mango; papaya; parsley; prunes; red pepper; snap beans; spirulina; and sweet potatoes. I have seen patients improve their vision, i.e., decrease the amount of correction in the lens, by as much as four diopters in one year by juicing one pound of carrots per day into eight ounces of liquid, incorporating this into their diet for a period of one year.

Another vitamin and antioxidant nutrient beneficial to the eyes, which also plays a key role in the prevention of age-related nuclear lens opacities, is vitamin E. Vitamin E helps protect the lens from oxidative damage from light, sugar and cigarette smoke. Wheat germ and sunflower oil are two good sources of vitamin E, which works its way into cell membranes and disarms free radicals before they have a chance to attack cells. Other sources of vitamin E are asparagus; bran; brown rice; butter; eggs; cold-pressed vegetable oils; cucumbers; dark green vegetables; fruits; herring; kale; almonds; nuts; peanuts; seeds; soybeans; unrefined cereals; and whole grains.

Certain nutrients can help protect the lens from free radical damage. The lens relies on vitamins C and E, beta-carotene (a precursor of vitamin A) and minerals such as selenium, zinc and copper to protect itself. B vitamins such as B2 (riboflavin) and B12, as well as an amino acid called cysteine, may also be involved.

Vitamin C is concentrated in the lens and in the aqueous humor, the watery fluid surrounding the lens, about 10 to 30 times the concentrations in other parts of the body. Vitamin C is a water-soluble antioxidant, and the lens is composed mostly of fluid and proteins. The concentration of vitamin C naturally decreases in the lens as we age and is likely to be a primary reason the lens becomes cataractous. Vitamin C is found in almost all fresh fruits and vegetables; acerola; rose hips; cherries; alfalfa sprouts; apricots; asparagus; black currants; cantaloupe; cauliflower; citrus fruits; green vegetables; guavas; mangos; mustard greens; papaya; strawberries; and tomatoes.

In part II of this series, we will examine the role of minerals in preventing and slowing the progression of cataracts and age-related macular degeneration.

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Dr. Deborah Banker is an internationally known radio personality, lecturer and advocate of wholistic medicine. She received her medical degree from the University of North Dakota at Grand Forks, with additional training at the University of Minnesota and Trinity College Medical Center in Dublin, Ireland. She received specialized training in Ophthalmology at the University of Rochester, New York and the University of California. She also studied under a surgical research fellowship at the Doheny Eye Institute and the University of California at Irvine, and has taken several classes at Emperor's College of Oriental Medicine, including acupuncture, herbology and the philosophy of oriental medicine.

Dr. Banker currently maintains a practice as an ophthalmologist and general practitioner in Malibu, California, with a special interest in electromagnetic therapy. Called a "modern Galileo" by the National Health Federation, Dr. Banker has worked for 20 years developing breakthroughs in regenerative medicine and anti-aging programs for the eyes, skin and body, using a noninvasive approach that combines Western orthoptics with ancient Oriental and wholistic medicine.



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