



ALL ABOUT CATARACTS



As we get older, many of us will develop cataracts, causing our eyesight to become cloudy and dim. Fortunately, delicate cataract surgery now restores clear vision to millions each year.

The lens and cornea at the front of our eyes work together to focus light onto the retina at the back and produce a clear image. A cataract is a cloudiness that develops over time in the normally transparent lens, which tends to blur and darken our vision. Cataracts can occur at any age, but they are more common later in life.

Causes and Symptoms

The reason most cataracts form is unknown. Over the years, proteins in the lens tend to clump. This disrupts the passage of light into the eye, scattering the rays rather than allowing them to be focused on the retina. The breakdown of proteins also leads to a buildup of yellowish-brown pigments, which then make colors appear "washed out".

While cataracts are painless, typically they make vision dim, cloudy and blurred. Other symptoms vary, depending on the type of cataract, but may include:

- Glare, halos, poor night vision
- Objects appearing faded or yellowish
- The need for more light to read
- Double vision
- Frequent prescription changes
- Sensitivity to bright light

Vision-restoring surgery

While such tactics as using a magnifying glass, choosing large-print reading materials, improving lighting, and changing to a stronger prescription can make vision acceptable for awhile, the only effective treatment for cataracts is surgery. It is quite safe and improves vision in more than 95% of cases, if the eye is otherwise healthy and normal.

Most cataract surgeries now take less than 30 minutes and are done on an outpatient basis. The most common

technique is phacoemulsification, or phaco (pronounced *FAY-coh*). Through a tiny incision made in the cornea, the surgeon inserts a thin probe into the lens. The probe sends out ultrasonic vibrations that shatter (emulsify) the damaged lens into tiny pieces, which are then vacuumed away through a tiny tube. Finally, an intraocular lens (IOL) implant is inserted to replace the original.

Post-surgery recovery

Following surgery, discomfort is usually minor. Complications are rare, but call the doctor if you experience eye pain, persistent redness, bleeding, excessive tearing or discharge, or sudden vision changes. It will take two to four weeks for vision to stabilize. After that, glasses can be prescribed, if needed.

If you have cataracts in both eyes, one eye is done first. This allows you to see if there are complications and evaluate the result. If your vision has sufficiently improved, you may be able to avoid surgery on the other eye.

Preventing Cataracts: What You Can Do

While there is no surefire way to avoid cataracts, research has shown that the following can be factors:

Stop smoking. It's known that smoking increases your chance of developing cataracts.

Reduce UV exposure. Protect against the sun's harmful UV rays by wearing sunglasses that block both UVA- and UVB-type rays. A wide-brimmed hat is also helpful.

Focus on nutrients. Some studies suggest high doses of antioxidant vitamins may protect the eye from damage by free radicals, while others find that supplementation provides no special protection. Eating a healthy antioxidant-rich diet, however, is a good idea.