

Cataracts

The part of your eye responsible for focusing light and producing clear, sharp images is the lens. A cataract is the clouding of this natural lens within the eye. This clouding stops light from reaching the retina in the eye, causing clouded or blurred vision. You can have cataracts in one eye or in both, but they do not spread from eye to eye.

Cataracts are a common condition and are the leading cause of visual loss among adults 55 and older.

Symptoms

Cataracts often form slowly and so gradually that they cause few symptoms. If you have a cataract or cataracts forming, you will most likely notice...

- Your vision is cloudy, blurry, foggy or filmy
- Nearsightedness that comes on rapidly
- Changes in the way you see color, especially yellow
- Problems driving at night due to the 'halo' effect of lights, especially car headlights
- Problems with glare
- Double vision
- Close-up vision that rapidly improves

The best way to determine whether you have a cataract is an eye examination. We will be able to determine the extent of the cataract and how it has changed your vision.

Causes

Normally, your eyes act like cameras for your brain. Light rays enter through the front of your eyes, pass through the cornea, the pupil and the lens. The lens bends and focuses the light rays on the retina. The optic nerve sends this image to the brain, which forms it into vision. When the lens of your eye is not clear, the image cannot be sent through properly, resulting in the vision changes associated with cataracts. The lens clouds because of a buildup and change in its protein that turns it from clear to cloudy. No one knows what causes this buildup and change in the protein.

For most people, cataracts are a natural result of aging; however, there are other causes of cataracts, such as...

- ♦ Injury to the eye
- ♦ Use of some medications

- ◆ Diseases such as diabetes
- ◆ Congenital (babies are sometimes born with cataracts due to an infection)
- ◆ Long-term exposure to toxic substances
- ◆ Exposure to ultraviolet light
- ◆ Exposure to radiation

Since cataracts are so common in older adults, it's very important to have your eyes checked by an eye professional on a regular basis. The American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO) recommends that those aged 40 to 64 should have a complete eye exam at least every 2 to 4 years. People 65 and older should have one every 1 to 2 years. These exams should be done more often, depending upon symptoms and diagnosis.

Treatment

Because we don't really know the mechanism that causes most cataracts, there is no proven way of preventing them. However, treatment is available. If your vision is not badly affected by cataracts, especially in the early stages, a prescription for eyeglasses or contacts may be enough to help you go about your daily life.

If you suffer from vision loss that makes it hard for you to do the things you need to do, cataract surgery will completely clear up the problem. Over one million cataract surgery procedures are performed each year.

In cataract surgery, the cloudy lens is replaced with a clear plastic one. This surgery is usually done on an outpatient basis. After the eye has been anesthetized, high-energy sound waves are used to break down the cataract into tiny particles, which are carefully removed through a small incision. Since the eye's natural lens has been removed, an artificial lens is then inserted in its place.

Different people heal at different rates, and respond to surgery differently, but normally you will go home soon after the surgery. You'll have to take it easy the rest of the day. You may begin seeing improvement in your vision as early as the next day. More than 9 out of 10 people who have this surgery have improved vision.