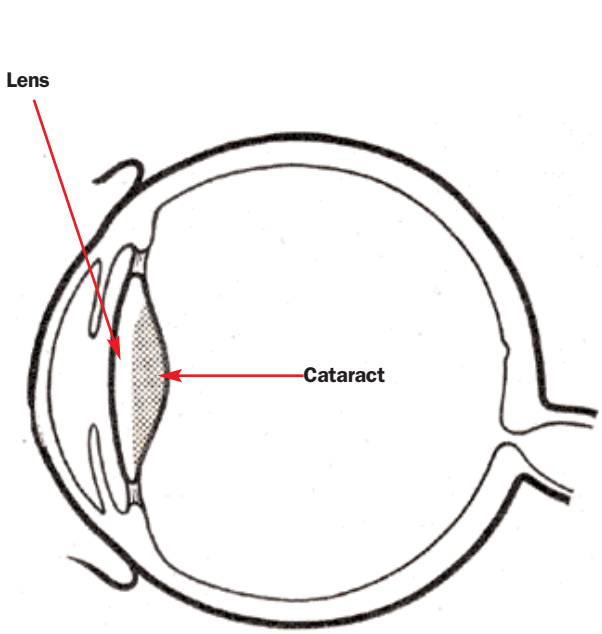
Cataracts



Normal vision

Typical blurred vision with an advanced cataract

Medownick Laser Clinic

What is a cataract?

A cataract is a small patch of cloudiness or opacity that develops in the usually crystal-clear lens of the eye. The human lens is a small, convex, glass-like object in the front of the eye which normally allows light to pass through it to focus it onto the back of the eye (rather like a magnifying glass).

When a cataract is present, light cannot pass readily through the affected lens and thus vision is distorted. A cataract can form in one or in both eyes, not necessarily at the same time. Cataracts are not a form of cancer.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms depend on the size and the site of the opacity in the lens. The only significant symptom is poor vision.

Typical complaints are:

- Reading difficulty
- Blurred vision
- Difficulty in recognising faces
- Difficulty with television viewing
- Problems with driving, especially at night
- Reduced ability to see in bright light
- May see haloes around lights

Cataracts usually develop slowly and people may not realise their vision is deteriorating in the early stages. In some people vision is only mildly affected. There is no pain or discomfort, redness, itching or watering of the eye.

What causes cataracts?

Advancing age is the most common cause. Long exposure to UV light from the sun will accelerate development of cataracts.

They are more likely to develop with:

- Diabetes
- Eye disease
- Past eye injury
- Corticosteroids (topical or oral)

Cataracts are not caused by eye strain or reading in bad light.

Who gets a cataract?

A cataract can occur at any age but most are found in the elderly. Sixty-five per cent of people in their 50s and all people older than 80 have some degree of cataract. The sexes are equally affected. Cataracts also run in families.

How are cataracts diagnosed?

They are diagnosed during an eye examination, but eye specialists are necessary to pinpoint the exact degree and site of the cataract.

What is the treatment?

There is no effective simple treatment including drugs or herbs. Sometimes a new prescription for glasses can help people cope. Surgery is the only effective cure and while it is a substantial and delicate operation it is safe and effective with very good results in more than 95% of cases.

Prevention

Sunglasses, particularly those that wrap around and filter UV light, may offer protection against cataract formation.

When should a cataract be removed?

A cataract does not have to be removed just because it is there. It should be removed when people cannot cope comfortably and it interferes with their life. Age is no barrier to surgery.

What does surgical removal involve?

It usually involves a day surgery procedure which is a 4-5-hour stay. It can be performed under local or general anaesthetic. It is a delicate procedure and is not painful. Very fine instruments make a small incision in the front of the eye and extract the old cataract-containing lens. It is replaced by a plastic lens in the space left by the old lens. The new artificial one will last forever.

What happens after surgery?

Afterwards you may only need one dose of paracetamol for any discomfort and will need drops for a couple of weeks. You will notice a significant improvement in light intensity, colours and quality of vision, but you will probably need glasses for some activities, especially reading. Vision may take a few weeks to improve. At a later date some patients may require laser therapy to clear away any opacities behind the lens implant.

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