

Cataracts explained

A cataract is a clouding of the normally clear lens of the eye. Cataracts are treated by removing the cloudy lens of the eye with surgery. Sun protection and quitting smoking may help prevent cataracts. Cataracts are common in older people.

Having a cataract can be compared to looking through a frosted or steamed window. A cataract is not a growth or film over the eye, rather a clouding of the normally clear lens of the eye.

Symptoms

Symptoms of cataract can include:

- Blurring of vision
- Glare or light sensitivity
- Poor night vision
- Decreased vision
- Fading of colour perception
- Needing a brighter light to read.

Cataracts can be diagnosed with an eye examination. If you notice any changes in your vision, you should have your vision checked by a GP, optometrist or eye specialist.

Cataracts are common in older people

Cataracts develop as a normal part of the aging process and are most common in people over 60. The prevalence of cataract rises from about 2.5 per cent for people in their 40s to 99 per cent of people in their 90s.

Almost half of people in their 90s have had cataract surgery. Cataract surgery is the most commonly performed ophthalmic surgery in Australia and is becoming more common as people live longer.

Causes of cataracts

The most common type of cataract is associated with ageing. Other causes of cataract include:

- Smoking
- Sunlight exposure
- Diabetes
- Arthritis
- Short-sightedness
- Some blood pressure lowering medications.

Cataracts are treated by surgery

Cataract is treated by removing the cloudy lens of the eye with surgery. After the cloudy lens is removed, it is replaced with an intraocular lens implant to restore the focusing power of the eye. Most surgeries are done as day procedures and do not require an overnight stay in hospital. In approximately 25 per cent of people, the capsule that supports the lens in the eye becomes cloudy some time after cataract surgery. Laser surgery is used to open this cloudy capsule and restore clear vision.

Success of cataract surgery

Around 85 per cent of patients who have undergone cataract surgery have sufficient vision to drive a car. Complications are rare, but as with any surgery, a perfect result cannot be guaranteed.

Can cataracts be prevented?

Currently, we do not know how to prevent cataract, but sun protection (wearing sunglasses and a wide brimmed hat outdoors) and not smoking can reduce your risk. Research is currently being conducted to determine if antioxidants may help prevent or delay the onset of cataracts.

Where to get help

- Optometrist
- Ophthalmologist (eye specialist)
- GP.

Things to remember

- Cataracts are a common cause of low vision in the elderly.
- Cataract surgery is safe and effective.
- Sun protection and quitting smoking may help to prevent or delay cataracts.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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