

Cataracts explained

A cataract is a clouding of the normally clear lens of the eye. It is like the lens of a camera becoming fogged up or the mirror in the bathroom becoming fogged up with steam. Contrary to common belief, a cataract is not a film over the eye.

The 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.

An optometrist or eye specialist (ophthalmologist) can diagnose a cataract 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

The prevalence of cataract rises from about 2.5 per cent for people in their forties to 99 per cent of people in their 90s. Nearly 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. In 1999, approximately 120,000 cataract operations were performed.

The 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

After cataract surgery 85 per cent of people have vision good enough to drive a car. Complications are rare, but as with any surgery, a perfect result cannot be guaranteed.

Can cataract be prevented?

Currently, we do not know how to prevent cataract, but sun protection (use of a brimmed hat and sunglasses when outside) and quitting smoking may help. Research is currently being conducted to determine if antioxidants may help prevent or delay the onset of cataracts.

Where to get help

- An optometrist
- An ophthalmologist (eye specialist)
- Your GP.

Things to remember

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

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

Centre for Eye Research Australia

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