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Cataracts

Cataracts are a leading cause of blindness among older adults. Yet young people and even newborns can get cataracts.

More than 20 million Americans age 40 and older have cataracts. More than half of all Americans have cataracts by the time they are 80 years old.

The good news is that doctors can treat cataracts. **Surgery restores sight in more than 95% of cases treated.**

What are cataracts?

A cataract is a clouding of the eye's lens. Normally, the lens is clear. It focuses light onto the retina at the back of the eye, which sends images to the brain.

A cataract blocks light needed for sight. Your vision may become blurry or dim because light can't pass properly through the lens to the retina.

A cataract is not contagious. Using the eyes will not make the cataract worse.

Cataract risk factors

The exact cause of cataracts is unknown. Most often, a cataract is part of getting older. These factors may also play a role:

- Intense heat or long-term exposure to UV rays from the sun
- Inflammation in the eye
- Hereditary influences
- Events before birth, such as German measles in the mother
- Long-term steroid use
- Eye injuries
- Eye diseases
- Certain other diseases, such as diabetes
- Smoking

How can I tell if I have cataract?

Cataract generally does not cause pain, redness or tears.

Founded in 1908, Prevent Blindness America is the nation's leading volunteer eye health and safety organization dedicated to fighting blindness and saving sight. Focused on promoting a continuum of vision care, Prevent Blindness America touches the lives of millions of people each year through public and professional education, advocacy, certified vision screening training, community and patient service programs and research.

However, these changes in your vision may be signs of cataract:

- Blurred vision, double vision, ghost images, the sense of a "film" over the eyes
- Lights seem too dim for reading or close-up work, or you are "dazzled" by strong light
- Changing eyeglass prescriptions often. The change may not seem to help your vision.

You may notice the cataract on your eye. It may look like a milky or yellowish spot in the pupil (the center of your eye is normally black).

Problems seeing become more noticeable as cataracts develop. A cataract may develop quickly over months or slowly over years. Many people never reach the point where surgery is necessary.

Eye doctors usually recommend surgery when vision problems interfere with day-to-day tasks.

Is surgery the only treatment?

Yes. Cataracts cannot be treated with medicines. Eye drops or other drugs will not dissolve a cataract or slow its progress.

Cataract surgery

Surgery is the only proven treatment for cataract. It is a delicate operation. Yet, it is one of the safest operations done today. More than 95% of surgeries are successful. Fewer than 5% of cases have complications such as inflammation, bleeding, infection and retinal detachment.

Most people need surgery when the cataract causes enough vision loss to interfere with work, play or other day-to-day tasks. You and

your eye doctor should decide together when and if surgery is needed.

Restoration of sight

During surgery, the clouded lens is removed. There are a number of ways to remove cataracts. The eye surgeon will use the method that is best for the patient.

The surgeon reaches the lens with a tiny surgical scalpel. Then the doctor breaks up the lens with a probe that may use ultrasound, a laser, or a water jet. The pieces of the lens are removed from the eye.

Cataract surgery is like taking the lens out of a camera. A new lens is needed so that the eye can focus light onto the retina, the way a camera focuses light onto film.

Most cataract patients receive an artificial lens, called an intraocular lens implant. This replaces the cataract-damaged lens that was removed.

Most patients go home the day of surgery. Depending on their overall health, others go home in a few days.

Sight after surgery

Lens implants come closest to a normal human lens. You may not be able to see distant objects clearly for a month or two after surgery. You may need eyeglasses for near or distant vision.

There is no loss of side vision with lens implants. The lenses move with the eye. For those who do not have lens implants, cataract eyeglasses are effective. However, vision is not normal. Cataract eyeglasses magnify everything 30%. There is a loss of side vision, so patients must turn their heads and look straight at objects.

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