MEDICAL

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The aging eye

Do cataracts spread from eye to eye?

No. But often they develop in both eyes at the same time.

Has my cataract been caused by overuse of my eyes?

No. Cataract is not caused by overuse of the eyes and using the eyes when cataract starts to develop will not make the cataract worse.

Are there different kinds of cataract?

Yes. Cataracts can be caused by injuries to the eye. A cut, blow or burn to the eye can cause damage to the lens inside the eye. This type of cataract is called a traumatic cataract.

Can children have a cataract?

Yes. Babies can be born with this condition. This is called congenital cataract.

My cousin developed a cataract, he has diabetes, is there a link?

Yes. Cataract is more common in people who have certain diseases such as diabetes.

My friend tells me that anyone can develop cataracts, it is part of growing old!

Most forms of cataract develop in adult life. The normal process of aging causes the lens to harden and become cloudy (opaque). This is called age-related cataract and it is the most common type. It can occur anytime after the age of 40.

Patient: 'I didn't know that I had a cataract until my doctor told me!'

Some people may or may not be aware that a cataract is developing; it can start at the edge of the lens and initially may not cause problems with vision. Generally, as a cataract develops, people experience blurring or hazing of vision. Often they become more sensitive to light and glare.

Patient: 'I seemed to have to go to my optician more often to get new glasses'.

There may be a need to get new prescriptions for glasses more often when a cataract is developing. When cataracts worsen, stronger glasses no longer improve sight. Objects have to be held close to the eye to be seen. The hole in the iris (pupil) may no longer look black; a white or yellow appearance may be seen. The lens behind the pupil becomes more dense and cloudy (opaque) as the cataract develops.

Treatment

When do I have my cataract treated?

When a cataract progresses to the point that it is interfering with daily activities and normal lifestyle, cataract surgery is usually indicated.

Could anything have been done to stop me from developing a cataract?

There is no known prevention for cataracts. Modern surgery is highly successful for the majority of patients.

I thought that nowadays cataracts are quickly removed with a laser beam?

Surgery is the only effective way to remove the cloudy lens. Cataracts cannot be removed with a laser beam.

I have cataracts developing in both eyes - do I have treatment to both eyes at the same time?

No. It is common for cataracts to develop more quickly in one eye than the other. The timing of an operation is decided by the ophthalmologist. Usually, the more seriously affected eye is operated on first.

What does the operation involve?

Removal of the lens involves an operation which makes a tiny opening into the eye at the edge of the cornea. Ophthalmologists use a microscope to carry out the operation. The cloudy lens will be removed from inside the eye, and replaced permanently with a clear plastic implant lens. The new lens helps to focus the light rays to the back of the eye. This is a painless procedure

What kind of anesthetic is necessary?

Most operations for cataract are performed under local anesthetic. This is a method of pain prevention usually given by eye drops or injection around the eye.

How do I see after the operation?

This intraocular lens (IOL) corrects the vision in the eye after the cataract operation. Many people still require reading glasses with an intraocular lens implant.

Will I have to stay in the hospital for a long time?

No. Most operations for cataracts are performed with same day surgery. This means that you are admitted to a hospital, have your operation and are discharged home all in the same day. You do not stay overnight in the hospital. For a minority of patients an overnight stay is needed.

What are the complications of cataract surgery?

Serious complications are uncommon following cataracts surgery, however, like most operations problems may develop occasionally.

Infection, following cataract surgery is very uncommon.

Inflammation, this can be treated with drops.

An accumulation of fluid in the retina may occur.

The implanted lens may occasionally move from its original position causing distorted vision. If this happens, further surgery may be needed to reposition the displaced lens.

The retina may become separated from the inner wall of the eye. This is referred to as a retinal detachment and may require surgery.

Thickening of the membrane behind the new lens can occur in the months following surgery. This is referred to as capsular opacity. Although the vision becomes blurred it can be treated with laser.

Aftercare

Will my eyes be covered after the operation and will I have any pain?

Your operated eye will be covered with a protective plastic eye shield. Some patients may additionally have an eye pad. As the anesthetic wears off, there can sometimes be a dull ache felt in and around the operated eye.

How long do I have my eye covered?

The next day at the doctor's office the eye pad is removed, the eye lids are cleaned, the eye examined, and you will start to put in your eye drops. All patients are advised to wear the protective plastic eye shield when in bed at night for a week after the operation.

How long do I have to use eye drops for?

Eye drop treatment prevents infection and helps reduce inflammation after surgery and may be necessary for about one month.

Is there anything else I have to do to care for my eye?

You should avoid rubbing or touching your eye. You may find that you are sensitive to light. It is useful to have a pair of plain dark glasses in case you need them.

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