

Cataracts are the clouding of the lens in the eye.

What to look for

- hazy vision.
- impaired vision at night; difficulty in discerning movements, details, or objects.
- blinding or uncomfortable glare from automobile headlights or bright sunlight.
- seeing halos around lights.
- unexpected improvement in near vision.
- double or triple vision in one eye only.
- in an advanced case, a milky white or opaque appearance to the normally transparent lens of the eye
- painful inflammation and pressure within the eye (very advanced case).

The lens of the human eye focuses light so that you can see objects clearly at various distances. It has no blood supply of its own; therefore, when it is damaged it cannot form new cells and responds by becoming opaque, forming a cataract. The cataract causes a gradual and painless loss of vision.

Despite how common the disease is, it is actually one of the less serious eye disorders, because surgery can restore the lost sight in most cases.

Causes

The most common cause is aging. If this is the case, the centre of the lens will be affected first. There is vision for several years until the whole lens is affected.

Some people are born with cataracts due to an injury or disease while in the womb.

Exposure to bright sunlight can react with the protein in the lens and create cataracts earlier than usual as well as cigarette smoke, air pollution, vitamin deficiencies, and heavy alcohol consumption. A low level of calcium in the blood can cause this complaint, sudden increases in blood sugar levels in young people can result in a clouding of the lens. They can develop as a result of accidents, sports injuries and exposure to electromagnetic, microwave or infra-red radiation.

By shining a pen-light on your pupil, your doctor may detect the cataract. Using special instruments and techniques, your ophthalmologist will identify its precise character, location, and extent.

Traditional Treatment

At present the only corrective treatment for a developed cataract is surgery. However, both conventional and alternative therapies are seeking ways to prevent cataract formation.

Cataract surgery is one of the most successful of all operations.

The operation, usually performed under local anaesthesia on an outpatient basis, is safe, fast, and nearly painless.

The single most important thing you can do to prevent cataract development is to avoid bright sunlight outdoors by wearing sunglasses that filter out UVB. Dark glasses that do not filter out UVB can actually increase your risk, because your pupils widen to adjust to the decreased light, thus exposing your eyes to more of the dangerous UVB radiation.

Dietary Considerations

Antioxidants, which reduce free radicals (unstable chemical compounds) that can damage lens protein, offer protection against cataract development by lessening or retarding protein deterioration in the lens brought on by environmental factors.

Naturopaths recommend a diet high in fruits and vegetables containing antioxidants such as beta carotene (vitamin A), selenium, and vitamins C and E, including citrus fruits, spinach, sweet potatoes, carrots, and broccoli.

When to seek further professional advice

- You develop any of the symptoms mentioned above.