

Myths About Cataracts

A cataract is a clouding of the normally clear lens of the eye. It can be compared to a window that has been frosted or yellowed.

There are many misconceptions about cataracts. A cataract is not a film over the eye. It is not caused by over use of the eyes. It can not spread from one eye to the other. And, it is not a cause of irreversible blindness.

Common symptoms of cataract may include a painless blurring of vision; a glare or light sensitivity; poor night vision; double vision in one eye; needing brighter light to read; or the fading or the yellowing of colors.

The amount and pattern of cloudiness within the lens of the eye can vary. If the cloudiness is not near the center of the lens, you may not be aware that a cataract is even present.

The most common type of cataract is related to aging of the eye. Causes of cataracts can also include:

- Family history
- Medical problems, such as diabetes
- Injury to the eye
- Medications, especially steroids
- Long-term, unprotected exposure to sunlight
- Previous eye surgery

How is a cataract diagnosed? An eye examination by your ophthalmologist (eye doctor) can detect the presence of a cataract as well as other conditions that may cause blurred vision or other eye problems.

Problems with other parts of the eye (e.g., cornea, retina, optic nerve) can be responsible for vision loss and may prevent you from having much or any improvement in vision after cataract surgery. If improvement in your vision is unlikely, cataract removal may not be recommended. Your ophthalmologist can tell you how much visual improvement is likely.

How quickly do cataracts develop? Most age related cataracts form gradually over a period of years. Other cataracts, especially in younger people and people with diabetes, may progress rapidly over a very short period of time. It is not always possible to predict exactly how fast a cataract will develop in an individual.

Surgery is the only way a cataract can be removed. However, if symptoms of the cataract are not bothering you very much, surgery may not be necessary. Sometimes a simple change in your eyeglass prescription may be helpful.

There are no medications, dietary supplements or exercises that have been shown to prevent or cure cataracts. However, you should consider surgery when cataracts cause enough loss of vision to interfere with your daily activities. More than 1.4 million people have cataract surgery each year in the United States, and more than 95% of those surgeries are performed without complications.

Cataract surgery is usually performed under local or topical anesthesia as an outpatient procedure. During surgery, the cloudy lens is removed from the eye. In most cases, the focusing power of the natural lens is restored just by replacing it with a permanent intraocular lens implant.

Cataract surgery is a highly successful procedure. Improved vision is the result in more than 95% of cases, unless there is a problem with the cornea, retina, optic nerve or other structures.

If you are experiencing decreased vision, particularly if you are elderly, an ophthalmologist can tell you whether a cataract or some other problem is the cause of your vision loss. Together you can decide if cataract surgery is appropriate for you.