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Cataracts

Cataract, a clouding of the lens behind the pupil inside the eye, produces hazy or blurry vision, poor color perception, and glare. 70% of those age 75 or more have cataracts.

Many people have cataract, but only a certain percentage of them need to consider treatment. This is because the one word, "cataract," must be used to describe a large range of conditions, from a mild haze of the lens up to a very dense opacification.

Usually, getting cataracts are a normal part of aging. But, there are conditions which can increase risk of getting cataract-- such as poor health habits or lifestyle choices. More on that later.

According to the American Academy of Ophthalmology, the only effective treatment for cataract is via surgery. Within mainstream medicine, there is no acceptance of the use of eyedrops to treat cataracts. There are, however, alternative therapies available via the internet. These eyedrops contain various vitamins and similar substances. I cannot encourage or discourage the use of these drops. It would not surprise me at all if a chemical means of controlling or reversing cataracts existed; after all, a cataract is a chemical change of the eye lens producing the opacification-- but I am unaware of good studies proving those drops are effective. Similarly, I am unaware of dangers using these sorts of drops.

When to consider cataract surgery

Talk with your eye doctor about whether surgery is right for you. Most eye doctors suggest considering cataract surgery when your cataracts begin to affect your quality of life or interfere with your ability to perform normal daily activities, such as reading or driving at night.

It's up to you and your doctor to decide when cataract surgery is right for you. For most people, there is no rush to remove cataracts because they usually don't harm the eye. Delaying the procedure won't make it more likely that you won't recover your vision if you eventually decide to have cataract surgery; although excessive delay in choosing surgery can make the cloudy, hardened lens more difficult to

remove and can elevate the risk of surgical complications. Take time to consider the benefits and risks of cataract surgery with your doctor.

If you choose not to undergo cataract surgery for now, your eye doctor may recommend periodic follow-up exams to see if your cataracts are progressing. How often you'll see your eye doctor depends on your situation.

What happens during cataract surgery

Almost always, cataract surgery involves removing the clouded lens and replacing it with a plastic lens implant. The replacement lens sits in the same place as your natural lens and becomes part of your eye. Tiny incisions allow the surgeon to emulsify and remove the cloudy lens and place the implant. These incisions usually do not require sutures.

Surgery is usually done on one eye at a time, with a few weeks between surgeries. It's generally done in a freestanding surgery center, which means you won't need to stay in a hospital after the surgery. Usually, eye drops are the only anesthesia required, and the procedure goes very quickly. You stay awake, but with sedation, during the procedure. The risk of complications from cataract surgery is very, very low.

Many people are surprised to learn that their lens prescription will be changed as a result of surgery. This is because when the implant lens is placed it will alter your eye's optics. This generally means that those who have had significantly thick glasses pre surgery will have a much lower prescription post op. Most of the time, some glasses will still be needed post surgery, if not for relatively minor distant correction at least for reading.

Another possible side benefit of cataract surgery involves eye pressure. Those who have had higher eye pressures and thus become "glaucoma suspects" may find that their pressure is lower post operatively.

Lifestyle and home remedies

To deal with symptoms of cataracts until you have surgery, try to:

Make sure eyeglasses or contact lenses are the most accurate possible.

If needed, use a magnifying glass to read.

Improve the lighting in your home with more or brighter lamps.

When you go outside during the day, wear sunglasses or a broad-brimmed hat to reduce glare.

Limit your night driving if glare is becoming a problem.

Prevention

Cataracts result from normal aging, heredity, ultraviolet light exposure, and related health issues. These related issues include smoking, diabetes, obesity, and certain

medications including long-term steroids. You may be able to reduce your risk of cataracts if you:

- **Quit smoking.** Ask your doctor for help to stop smoking.
- **Wear sunglasses.** Ultraviolet light from the sun may contribute to the development of cataracts. Wear sunglasses that block ultraviolet rays when you're outdoors.
- **Take care of other health problems.** Follow your treatment plan if you have diabetes or other medical conditions that can increase your risk of cataracts.
- **Maintain a healthy weight.** If your current weight is a healthy one, work to maintain it by exercising most days of the week. If you're overweight or obese, work to lose weight slowly by reducing your calorie intake and increasing the amount of exercise you get each day.

More information is available from the American Academy of Ophthalmology, at aao.org; or from the American Optometric Association at aoa.org/cataract.xml