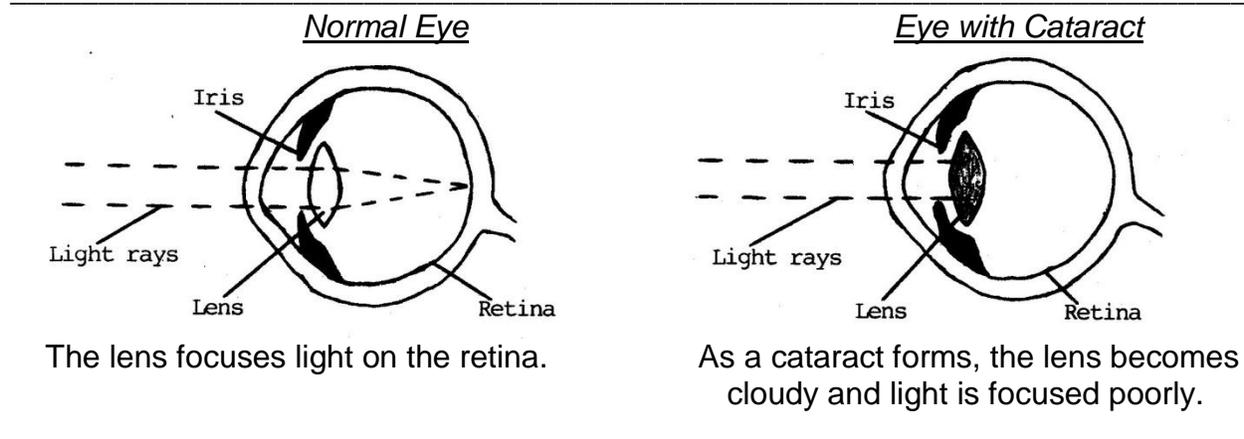


CATARACTS

WHAT IS A CATARACT?

A cataract is a clouding of the normally clear lens of the eye. This lens is located behind the iris (the colored part of the eye). Cataracts can be evaluated with the use of ophthalmic instruments. With normal aging, the lens of the eye hardens and loses clarity. When the lens starts becoming cloudy, it is referred to as a cataractous lens or a cataract.



WHAT ARE SYMPTOMS OF CATARACTS?

Symptoms of cataracts range from a slight loss of vision to actual blindness. Fuzzy or blurred vision, double vision, poor night vision, and decreased color perception are common symptoms of cataracts. Night driving may be a particular problem. Vision may decline from near normal to partial blindness under conditions of bright light or glare. As a cataract develops, a change in eye glasses often helps to improve sight. As the cataract worsens, eye glasses fail to provide adequate vision.

WHAT CAUSES A CATARACT?

The most common cause of a cataract is simply aging of the eye. Other causes of cataracts include:

- family history;
- medical problems, such as diabetes;
- injury to the eye;
- medications, especially steroids;
- radiation;
- long-term, unprotected exposure to sunlight;
- previous eye surgery;

HOW FAST DO CATARACTS PROGRESS?

Cataracts usually develop slowly, and some people hardly notice the slow and gradual loss of their vision. However, cataracts sometimes progress rapidly, with vision deteriorating over a few months. When the sight in one eye is affected by a cataract, there is generally a cataract developing in the second eye. It is not possible to predict how fast a cataract will develop in any individual patient.

HOW ARE CATARACTS TREATED?

Surgery provides the only available treatment for cataracts. When a cataract causes enough loss of sight to interfere with an individual's lifestyle or work, it is usually time to remove it. The ability to safely operate a motor vehicle is a consideration for some people.

Surgery is not necessary simply because a cataract is present. Symptoms from a cataract may be mild and well tolerated. On the other hand, there is seldom a reason to delay surgery when the loss of sight from a cataract interferes with daily activities. It is a misconception that a cataract needs to be "ripe" before it can be removed. Surgery can be performed whenever decreased vision warrants it. Cataract surgery is a highly successful procedure. Good vision is restored in over 90% of cases. However, there may be reasons for decreased vision in addition to a cataract, such as problems involving the retina. If such problems exist, sight after cataract surgery will still be abnormal.

Under an operating microscope, surgical instruments are used to remove a cataract. The most modern technique of cataract surgery is known as phacoemulsification. Phacoemulsification uses ultrasonic waves much as a laser uses waves of light. Phacoemulsification allows a cataract to be removed through a small incision and eliminates the need for numerous stitches. Because of this, the eye heals rapidly and vision is restored more quickly than with conventional surgery. "No stitch" cataract surgery is performed with phacoemulsification.

Cataract surgery is normally a painless procedure. It is performed under local or topical anesthesia. As the patient is not put to sleep for the operation, there is generally no risk to the patient's health. The entire stay in the out-patient surgical facility is only a few hours. If an eye patch is used, it can be removed a few hours after surgery.

WHAT IS AN INTRAOCULAR LENS?

An intraocular lens is a plastic lens that is routinely inserted in the eye during cataract surgery. It replaces the cataractous lens that is removed and becomes a permanent part of the eye. It does not need to be removed or replaced. The intraocular lens duplicates the focusing ability of the eye's natural lens. This eliminates the need for contact lenses or thick cataract glasses after surgery. Well over a million intraocular lenses are used in the United States each year.

IS A LASER USED DURING CATARACT SURGERY?

A laser is used to treat what is called a **secondary cataract**. The posterior (back) lens capsule is a cellophane-like membrane behind the natural lens of the eye. It is not removed at the time of cataract surgery. It promotes healing of the eye after surgery and temporarily supports the intraocular lens. The posterior lens capsule can become cloudy weeks to years after cataract surgery. If it blurs vision, it is often called a secondary cataract, and it can be treated with an in-office laser procedure. The procedure is called a **YAG laser capsulotomy**. The YAG laser is used to make an opening in the cloudy lens capsule, restoring vision to normal almost immediately. The procedure takes only minutes to do, and there are no restrictions in activities afterwards.