Cataract Basics

Just what is a cataract? Behind the iris and pupil of the eye lies the lens, clear in color and made of protein and water. As we age, it becomes inflexible, less transparent, and thicker. Some of its protein clumps together, too, and that starts to cloud a small area of the lens. This clouding is called a cataract.

A healthy lens focuses light that passes into your eye, producing sharp images at the back of the eye (the retina). A cataract scatters the light as it passes through the lens, reducing the sharpness of the image. In time a cataract may grow so large and dense that it’s difficult to read, drive at night, or see the expression on a grandchild’s face.

The risk of a cataract increases as you get older. About half the population has a cataract by age 65, and nearly everyone over age 75 has at least one. Although some cataracts are caused by inherited genetic disorders, most develop when aging changes the tissue that makes up the eye’s lens.

But there are causes besides age. Exposure to ultraviolet light and other types of radiation may injure the eye and result in cataracts. Studies suggest those with diabetes are at greater risk. Other possibilities are major tranquilizers, steroids, and diuretics; cigarette smoke; air pollution; exposure to lead; heavy alcohol consumption; hormone replacement therapy.

For a while, self-care methods like using a magnifying glass, limiting night driving, keeping eye prescriptions current, and improving the lighting in your home may help. But when vision loss begins to interfere with the quality of your life day in and day out, consider cataract surgery. It’s simple and relatively painless.

August Is Cataract Awareness Month

Prayer: I see clearly, God, that caring for myself is critical. Help me keep this front-of-mind today as I make decisions big and small. Amen.

Cataracts: Symptoms, Preventions, and Corrections

Having cataracts has been compared to viewing life through a foggy window. Specifically, here are the most common signs of cataracts (which can affect one or both eyes):

• Vision is cloudy, blurry, or dim.
• Colors seem faded or have a brown or yellow cast.
• Glare. Headlights, lamps, or sunlight seems too bright; or a halo appears around lights.
• Night vision is increasingly poor.
• Double vision occurs in a single eye.
• New prescriptions for eye glasses or contact lenses are needed frequently.

But there are many ways you can protect your vision, and most rely simply on common sense:

• Wear sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat to block ultraviolet sunlight and perhaps delay the formation of cataracts.
• If you smoke, stop!
• Eat right -- especially leafy, green vegetables and foods with antioxidants.
• Maintain a healthy weight.

More than 3 million Americans have cataract surgery each year, making it the most frequently performed surgery in the country. All surgery involves some risk, but very few patients have serious problems or complications after cataract surgery.

Cataract surgery is highly successful at restoring vision: 90% of patients have vision between 20/20 and 20/40 afterwards!

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