

CATARACTS

What are Cataracts?

Cataract is the name given to the progressive clouding of the natural lens inside the eye. This is a gradual process which typically occurs in older age. The natural lens is completely transparent allowing us to see through it. As cataracts develop, the cloudy lens blocks light, making it difficult to see through.

Who can get cataracts?

Cataracts typically occur as we get older, and they will develop in most people eventually. Babies can be born with a congenital cataract and younger people can develop cataracts as a result of injury to the eye. Some medical conditions and medications can also cause cataracts, such as diabetes and steroids. Smoking, drinking a lot of alcohol and being overweight increase your risk of developing cataracts. Stopping smoking, limiting alcohol intake, and maintaining a healthy weight is recommended. Too much sun exposure can also

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increase your risk of developing cataracts so it is recommended that you protect your eyes from UV rays by wearing sunglasses outside.

What are the symptoms of Cataracts?

The main symptom of cataract is blurred vision. You may notice a gradual change in your vision or, if you wear glasses, that they are not as clear. Glare, or sensitivity to light, can also be a symptom of cataract. You may have trouble seeing in bright sunlight and driving at night can become especially difficult because of glare from streetlights and oncoming headlights. Cataracts can affect your colour vision, making some colours appear faded or having a yellowish tinge. Cataracts usually appear in both eyes but they may not be the same in both eyes or progress at the same rate.

How are cataracts diagnosed?

If you experience any of these symptoms you should see your optometrist. Your optometrist

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can tell you if you have cataract by looking into your eyes and measuring your visual acuity.

Can cataracts be treated?

If you have no symptoms of a cataract, it is safe to leave it untreated, but it is recommended that you have regular eye exams to monitor its progression. Your optometrist may be able to improve blurred vision caused by the cataract by correcting any new or changed prescription with glasses. If your vision cannot be improved with glasses, and the blurred vision is affecting your ability to perform day to day tasks (for example, driving, reading), then your optometrist may refer you to an ophthalmologist to have surgery to remove the cataract. This is done as an outpatient procedure and involves removing the cloudy, natural lens and replacing it with a clear, plastic lens. If you have cataracts in both eyes, you will usually have one cataract removed at a time. After having surgery most people still need to

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wear glasses, often for reading and occasionally for distance vision as well. Once the cataract is removed it cannot recur. It is possible for the sac which contains the lens replacement to become cloudy resulting in misty or blurred vision like the symptoms of the cataract. This can be removed quickly and painlessly with a laser treatment carried out by an ophthalmologist.