

What is a Cataract?

The term “cataract” applies to changes which occur in the lens of the human eye with time and age. Just as a camera contains a lens which focuses light rays, our eyes also have a lens on the inside which brings the picture into focus. When the human lens becomes cloudy with time, it no longer does a good job of focusing light and vision is reduced.

How common are cataracts?

Cataracts are a natural part of the aging process, and virtually everyone who lives to the age of 60 or so will develop some changes in the natural lenses within their eyes. Less commonly, cataracts may occur in younger patients. Even more rarely, babies can be born with cloudy lenses. Our practice reserves the term “cataract” to describe changes in the lens which interfere with vision.

How do I know if I am developing a cataract?

The only symptoms of cataract are difficulty seeing well. Some patients have trouble seeing small street signs or difficulty with fine print. Other patients experience glare problems in bright sun or while driving at night. Pain, tearing, and itching are not typical symptoms of cataract, and usually indicate that something else is going on.

Another doctor told my friend she has cataracts but she sees fine. Was she misdiagnosed?

As noted before, our practice only uses the term cataract for clouding of the lens which causes symptoms. Other practitioners may use the term more broadly to apply to any change at all, with or without symptoms. While this difference in terminology may be confusing, it merely reflects a difference in philosophy: in our view the diagnosis appropriate only when there is an actual problem.

What can be done for cataracts?

There are two treatment choices: observation and surgery. Eye drops will not help treat cataracts unless there are other problems present.

Does everyone with a cataract need surgery?

No. Some patients with only mild clouding of the lens choose to put surgery off if their vision problems are relatively minor. Some patients with cataracts can have their vision improved to an acceptable level with a glasses prescription change. The doctors in our practice will help you decide which choice is best for you, though the final decision will be made by you, based on your symptoms.

How risky is the surgery?

Although we don't like to think about complications, every treatment entails some degree of risk. A few decades ago, cataract surgery was considered a high risk procedure, and only the most severely afflicted patients were eligible. Advances in this procedure have made it dramatically safer; today cataract surgery is the most common outpatient procedure in the U.S. Complications are fortunately rare using current techniques, and the vast majority of patients experience excellent vision after surgery.

Is the surgery done with laser?

Sometimes. There are many different techniques for removing cataracts, some of which involve using laser to perform portions of the procedure. The biggest difference between laser cataract surgery and surgery without laser is the out-of-pocket cost to the patient, which typically ranges in the thousands of dollars.

What do you do when you operate on cataracts?

During cataract surgery, the cloudy natural lens is removed from the eye, and an artificial lens is placed inside the eye to restore focus. The surgery is usually performed with patients awake with sedation, and generally takes less than half an hour.

Does the surgery hurt?

No, the combination of numbing medication and sedation results in a comfortable experience overall.

Which lens implant is best for me?

The choice of lens implant will be different in different patients. Many patients prefer to see well without glasses for distance, while others want to be able to read without glasses. Some patients elect the Restor lens implant, which can maximize the ability to see both near and distant objects without glasses. There are also lens implants to correct for astigmatism which is due an irregularly shaped eye surface. The choice of lens implant is highly individualized, and we will help you decide which lens is best for you.

Does cataract surgery need to be repeated?

Generally, no. Occasionally there will be a complication during surgery which requires another operation within a few days to weeks. Also, months to years after successful cataract surgery, a cloudy membrane may develop behind the lens. The membrane can be eliminated with a 5 minute painless laser procedure.