



WHAT IS A CATARACT (CAT-ah-rakt)?

A cataract is a clouding of the eye's natural lens. The word cataract is derived from a Greek word meaning "waterfall" (looking through falling water). Cataracts are most commonly caused by chemical changes within the lens of the eye, which is thought to be part of the natural aging process. But cataracts may also result from ultraviolet damage, heredity, alcohol, smoking, trauma, disease, or prolonged use of certain medications.

Depending on the degree of cloudiness, a cataract will cause a gradual decrease in vision. The rate at which a cataract develops is highly variable. Nearly half of the population over 65 will have some degree of cataract formation in their lifetime. It is not a tumor or a growth, nor is it a film over the eye that can be peeled away. In advanced cases, vision can only be restored by surgical removal of the cataract. Routine medical eye examination is necessary to diagnose this common condition.

HOW DOES A CATARACT AFFECT VISION?

Because cataracts are generally slow growing, in the first few years of development most people who have cataracts are unaware of their formation. Vision changes are usually slight and gradual. As months and years pass, most people become somewhat accustomed to their decreased visual status.

A person with advancing cataract formation will experience increasing levels of blurry or hazy vision. Some people describe it as "looking through a fog." You may experience a glare or a halo around bright lights. As the lens of the eye becomes cloudier, colors may appear dull or washed out. Most people will require bright light to assist reading and they will generally find driving at night extremely difficult.

Cataracts do not cause pain, although some people may experience discomfort and/or eyestrain from excessive glare and loss of vision. Cataracts generally cause a much more rapid change in your eyeglass prescription than previously experienced. In addition, these changes are frequently in a reverse power swing from the customary vision changes associated with passing time. It is time to have surgical removal of cataract when your decreasing vision makes it difficult or impossible to carry on your daily activities.

HOW FAST DO CATARACTS GROW?

In most people, cataracts grow very slowly. In fact, less than ten percent of patients who develop cataracts ultimately need to have them removed. On rare occasions, they can develop very quickly causing severe visual loss with associated lifestyle restrictions.

Generally, patients with slight to moderate cataract development have minimal associated problems. They may experience difficulty reading in dim light or driving at night, but have few limitations in daily activities. Since you have some cataract formation, more frequent examination is advised to track cataract progression and to maintain optimum visual function for as long as possible.

WHEN SHOULD A CATARACT BE REMOVED?

Not many years ago, patients would wait until their cataract was ripe or mature before having a cataract removed. By this time, vision was so poor in the affected eye they could no longer see well enough to read or drive.

With today's microsurgical procedures, surgery does not have to wait until the cataract interferes with everyday activities. Naturally, the recommendation for cataract surgery varies from patient to patient. Many people have a higher level of tolerance for the gradual blur that is associated with cataract advancement, while other lifestyles require the highest level of visual ability.

There are no set standards. This is an individual decision, which depends on you and your specific needs. When the time is right for surgical treatment, we will discuss this further to help you make an informed decision.

Cataract surgery can provide the majority of patients with great visual improvement. You can be assured that we will do everything possible to achieve our mutual goal; restoration of your sight.