



North Shore Eye Centre

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CATARACTS

What are cataracts?

A cataract is a loss of transparency, or clouding, of the normally clear lens of the eye. As one ages, chemical changes occur in the lens that make it less transparent. The loss of transparency may be so mild vision is hardly affected or so severe that no shapes or movements are seen, only light and dark. When the lens gets cloudy enough to obstruct vision to any significant degree, it is called a cataract. Glasses or contact lenses cannot sharpen your vision if a cataract is present.

What causes a cataract?

The most common cause of cataract is aging, also referred as age-related cataract. Other causes of cataracts, not related to normal aging, include: Traumatic cataracts – related directly to an eye injury; Developmental cataracts – occur in children; Secondary cataracts – caused by other eye diseases or previous surgery within the eye. Medications such as steroids and systemic diseases such as diabetes and prolonged exposure to ultraviolet light can also cause cataracts. Occasionally, babies are born with a cataract.

How can age related cataracts be prevented?

Reducing the amount of ultraviolet light exposure by wearing a wide-brim hat and sunglasses may reduce your risk for developing a cataract but once developed there is no cure except to have the cataract surgically removed.

How can cataracts be diagnosed?

Your ophthalmologist examines your eyes with an instrument called the slit lamp microscope. This instrument provides a magnified, three-dimensional view of the lens.

Is surgery the only treatment and how is it performed?

If your vision is only slightly blurred, a change in the eyeglasses may help for a while. However, if you are not able to see well enough to do the things you like to do, surgery is the only way to remove a cataract.

Prior to surgery, the surgeon will take an ultrasound measurement of the length of your eye in order to prescribe the proper lens implant. You may also be given eye drops or medication to help you relax.

Outpatient surgical procedures can remove the cataract through either a small incision (phacoemulsification) or a large incision (extracapsular extraction). The time to have the surgical procedure is when your vision is bad enough that it interferes with your lifestyle.



Figure 1: Extracapsular extraction



Figure 2: Phacoemulsification

Cataract surgery is a very successful operation. One and a half million people in the USA have this procedure every year and 95% have a successful result. As with any surgical procedure, complications can occur during or after surgery and some are severe enough to limit vision. But in most cases, vision, as well as quality of life, improves.