A cataract is a clouding of the normally clear lens inside the eye. Over time, a cataract can significantly impact vision. Cataracts are very common in older people, but certain types can occasionally occur in younger people. Cataracts can occur in one or both eyes. Most cataracts can be effectively treated with surgery.

Because they are both common conditions, and incidence increases with age, cataracts and age-related macular degeneration (AMD) often occur at the same time.

**How the eye works**

Your eye works very much like an old-style film camera. The front of your eye, made up of the cornea, iris, pupil and lens, focuses the image onto the retina, which lines the back of your eye. The retina is a light sensitive tissue and acts like the film in a camera, capturing images and then sending them via the optic nerve to the brain, where the images are interpreted.

**What is a cataract?**

In a healthy eye, the lens is transparent so that light can easily pass through it, producing a sharp image on the retina. As we get older, parts of the lens can become cloudy, producing a cataract, a painless eye condition resulting in the scattering or reduction of light reaching the retina.

Symptoms of cataract include a loss of clarity or blurry vision, washed out colours, increased sensitivity to bright light, glare, haloes or rings appearing around lights.

With early cataract you may not notice any symptoms or experience any vision impairment. As the cataract progresses, symptoms become more noticeable. Some people say that having significant cataracts is like looking through a thick fog.

Cataracts normally develop quite slowly over many years, but sometimes can develop more rapidly. Cataracts generally form in both eyes although not always at the same time or rate. Cataracts will not get better on their own.
Risk factors for cataracts

Cataracts are very common, especially in people over the age of 60. In fact, by the age of 70, everyone has some degree of cataract. This is a normal part of ageing. Certain rare types of cataract can also occur in infants or younger people.

Cataracts can’t be prevented but progression may be delayed to a degree by:

• stopping smoking
• keeping diabetes under careful control, if you have it
• protecting your eyes from the sun with sunglasses and a hat
• eating a healthy diet with daily fruit and vegetables and 2-3 serves of fish per week

Cataract and AMD

Cataracts and aged-related macular degeneration are common eye conditions that can affect older people at the same time. A common question is whether cataract surgery affects the development of AMD.

Some studies and anecdotal reports suggest that cataract surgery may accelerate the progression of AMD. However, most major studies have shown no link. On balance, cataract surgery does not appear to contribute to worsening of AMD.

In some people, dense cataracts can mask the symptoms of AMD. When these dense cataracts are removed and replaced with new artificial intraocular lenses (or IOLs), vision is usually much clearer. This means the symptoms of AMD, such as distortion, can become more obvious. Some people have mistakenly concluded that the surgery made the AMD worse.

Cataract surgery is usually recommended when the vision becomes bad enough to impact daily activities.

Sometimes cataracts may affect the ophthalmologist’s ability to diagnose or monitor AMD or diabetic retinopathy and cataract surgery may be recommended.

In people with late stage AMD, most central vision is lost, and the person is very dependent on their peripheral (side) vision. If these people also have significant cataracts, cataract surgery can significantly improve the quality of peripheral vision.

At this time, there’s no evidence that vitamin supplements or eye drops will reduce the risk of cataracts or reverse their formation.
Several studies have shown that in people who have significant cataracts and late stage AMD, cataract surgery can produce major improvements in overall quality of life, even if central vision is not improved. In contrast, people with late stage AMD and mild cataracts don’t usually benefit greatly from cataract surgery.

People with conditions such as wet (neovascular) age-related macular degeneration or diabetic macular edema may be receiving regular injections of a drug to reduce the formation of unwanted new blood vessels and leakage under or within the retina. If these people also have significant cataracts, it is generally considered appropriate to delay cataract surgery until the new blood vessel formation and leakage has stabilised. Elective surgery can then be safely undertaken.

Some eye operations, such as a vitrectomy – a type of retinal surgery – significantly accelerate the progression of an existing cataract or increase the likelihood of a new cataract forming. If a cataract has already started to form before the vitrectomy, the surgeon may suggest having the cataract removed and replaced with an IOL at the same time as the vitrectomy, as it will avoid the need for another operation soon afterwards.

How are cataracts treated?

The symptoms of early cataract may be improved with new glasses, brighter lighting, antiglare sunglasses, or magnifying lenses. Despite these measures, if left untreated, cataracts will eventually result in significant loss of vision and possibly blindness.

In almost all cases, cataracts can be treated extremely effectively with surgery. Surgery involves the removal of the clouded lens from inside the eye, which is then replaced with a tiny, clear, plastic, artificial intraocular lens (or IOL). Cataract surgery usually takes less than 30 minutes and is normally performed under local anaesthesia with some sedation. There should be little or no pain, although you may feel some pressure under the eye. Recovery is usually quite rapid. Your ophthalmologist will discuss what post-operative symptoms to expect. If you experience severe or worsening pain, or your vision drops, contact your ophthalmologist immediately.

If you have cataracts in both eyes, each eye will usually be treated on separate days, often weeks apart.

Outcomes of cataract surgery

Cataract surgery is one of the most effective operations performed. Well over 90 per cent of people having cataract surgery notice a significant improvement in vision, and better quality of life. In general, the best outcomes are achieved when both eyes are treated.
You can find more information about macular disease on our website:
www.mdfoundation.com.au

Need more information?

You can also access our free, personalised support services and order information kits and Amsler grids by calling our National Helpline on 1800 111 709.

MDFA has a free newsletter and you can sign up to receive invitations to education sessions and events in your area.

Macular Disease Foundation Australia is committed to reducing the incidence and impact of macular disease, by providing up-to-date information, advice and support.

National Helpline

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