# About Cataracts

### What is a cataract?

A cataract is a cloudy area that appears within the lens of the eye that affects vision, and occurs as a natural part of aging. A healthy lens is clear, but as a cataract develops, the lens of the eye gradually becomes hard and cloudy, allowing less light to pass through and making it more difficult to see.[1]

In addition to age-related cataracts, there are other types of cataracts that can affect vision:[2]

- **Congenital cataract:** presents at or shortly after birth
- **Radiation cataract:** the result of exposure to certain types of radiation
- **Secondary cataract:** cataract formation as a result of other medical conditions, such as diabetes, or exposure to toxic substances, certain drugs (e.g. corticosteroids or diuretics), ultraviolet light or radiation
- **Traumatic cataract:** forms as a result of a traumatic eye injury

### What causes age-related cataracts?

Most cataracts develop from advanced aging.[1] As the body ages, the lens of the eye, which consists of water and protein, can become cloudy due to protein clumping together, scattering the light landing on the retina and causing visual impairment. When the cataract blocks light, vision is disrupted.[3] A cataract can develop in one or both eyes, but is independent and cannot spread from one eye to another. This condition also is more likely to occur due to the following:[1,2]

- Excessive alcohol consumption
- Diabetes
- High body mass index (BMI)
- Hypertension
- Smoking tobacco
- Ultraviolet (UV) light exposure
- After an unrelated eye surgery

### What are the symptoms?

Cataracts can develop slowly over many years; some people may not be aware they have them at first.[3] Within the early stages, a cataract may not cause any vision problems; and initially, the cloudiness may affect only a small part of the lens. Over time, the cataract may grow larger and cloud more of the lens, making it more difficult to see objects clearly.[2]

Early symptoms include blurriness and needing more light to read. Other common symptoms include glare, halos, double vision, difficulty with distance or near vision, and colors looking faded.[3] If left untreated, cataracts

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can lead to blindness.[2] As they develop and worsen, cataracts may also interfere with the ability to perform basic activities, such as driving and reading.[3]

### How are cataracts diagnosed and treated?

An eye care professional can diagnose the presence of a cataract during a comprehensive eye exam through a visual acuity test and a dilated eye exam.[2] Cataracts are treated by removing the eye's cloudy natural lens and replacing it with an artificial intraocular lens (IOL). An IOL is a man-made lens that is placed inside the eye during surgery. There are three types of IOLs:

- **Monofocal** IOLs have one point of focus, either distance or close up.
- **Multifocal** IOLs provide two or more points of focus and are designed to reduce the dependence on reading glasses as a result of presbyopia.
- **Toric** IOLs are designed to correct astigmatism, potentially reducing the need for glasses.

Cataract surgery is one of the most cost-effective procedures and patients can return to their normal routines within 24 hours following the surgery.[4]

1. World Health Organization, Prevention of Blindness and Visual Impairment. http://www.who.int/blindness/causes/priority/en/index1.html [Accessed July 22, 2014]
2. National Eye Institute (NEI), Facts about Cataract. http://www.nei.nih.gov/health/cataract/cataract_facts.asp [Accessed July 22, 2014]
3. World Health Organization (WHO), Vision 2020 Report. http://www.who.int/blindness/Vision2020_report.pdf [Accessed July 22, 2014]
4. Eye Surgery Education Council, Cataract Surgery. http://eyesurgeryeducation.org/surgery-optionscataract-about.php [Accessed July 22, 2014]