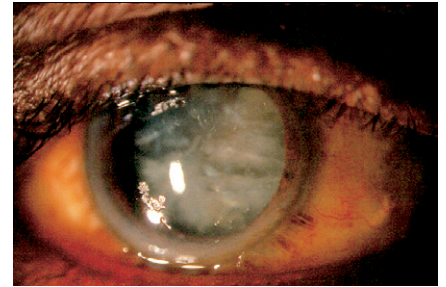


Cataract

Overview

A cataract is an opacification or cloudiness that develops within the lens of the eye. This is a normal part of the aging process that most people experience at some point. The lens is the part of the eye that focuses light on the retina, and allows us to see things sharply. The lens functions best when we are younger because it is crystal clear. As we age, the lens slowly turns yellow, then brown, and sometimes becomes opaque and white. An analogy is a window that is never washed. As dirt accumulates, the window loses its clarity, and it is no longer possible to see through it. Similarly, sometimes a cataract progresses to the point that vision decreases.



Age is not the only cause of cataracts. Trauma or injury to the eye, certain medications such as prednisone or cortisone, diabetes, and other less common medical conditions may also cause cataracts. Sometimes, people are even born with cataracts. Cataracts present at birth may be small and harmless, or may be large enough to interfere with vision.

A person with a cataract may notice problems such as blurred or distorted vision, glare from sunlight, headlights, or other lights, or trouble focusing on things. When these symptoms begin to interfere with activities of daily living, removal of the cataract may be recommended.

Cataract Surgery

Cataract surgery is a precise and technically demanding procedure. Cataract surgery is microsurgery, which means that it is performed under a high-powered operating microscope. This surgery is one of the most commonly performed surgical procedures in this country. It is also one of the most successful procedures. It is usually performed as an outpatient procedure, which means that you do not have to stay in the hospital overnight.

Your doctor will first numb the eye with topical anesthetic drops. Sometimes an anesthetic injection is required. Your doctor will make a tiny incision, approximately 1/5" in or next to the cornea of your eye. This is called a "clear corneal" incision. The doctor will then use an ultrasound-powered instrument to liquify and remove your cataract. This part of the procedure is called phacoemulsification. Researchers are experimenting with lasers to remove cataracts, but laser cataract removal currently offers no advantage over phacoemulsification.



When the cataract has been removed, your doctor will implant a new lens into your eye. This new lens is made of plastic. Sometimes a foldable plastic lens is used so that the initial incision does not have to be enlarged. The advantage of keeping the incision small is a more rapid healing time, and a quicker recovery from the procedure. Once placed into the eye, the lens is unfolded and placed in proper position.

Frequently, no stitches are needed to close the incision in the cornea. Your doctor will place a shield or protective glasses over the operated eye before you go home. In most cases, you can resume normal activity as early as the next day. Drops will be prescribed to prevent infection and inflammation in the eye, and your doctor will give you detailed instructions regarding postoperative follow-up examinations.